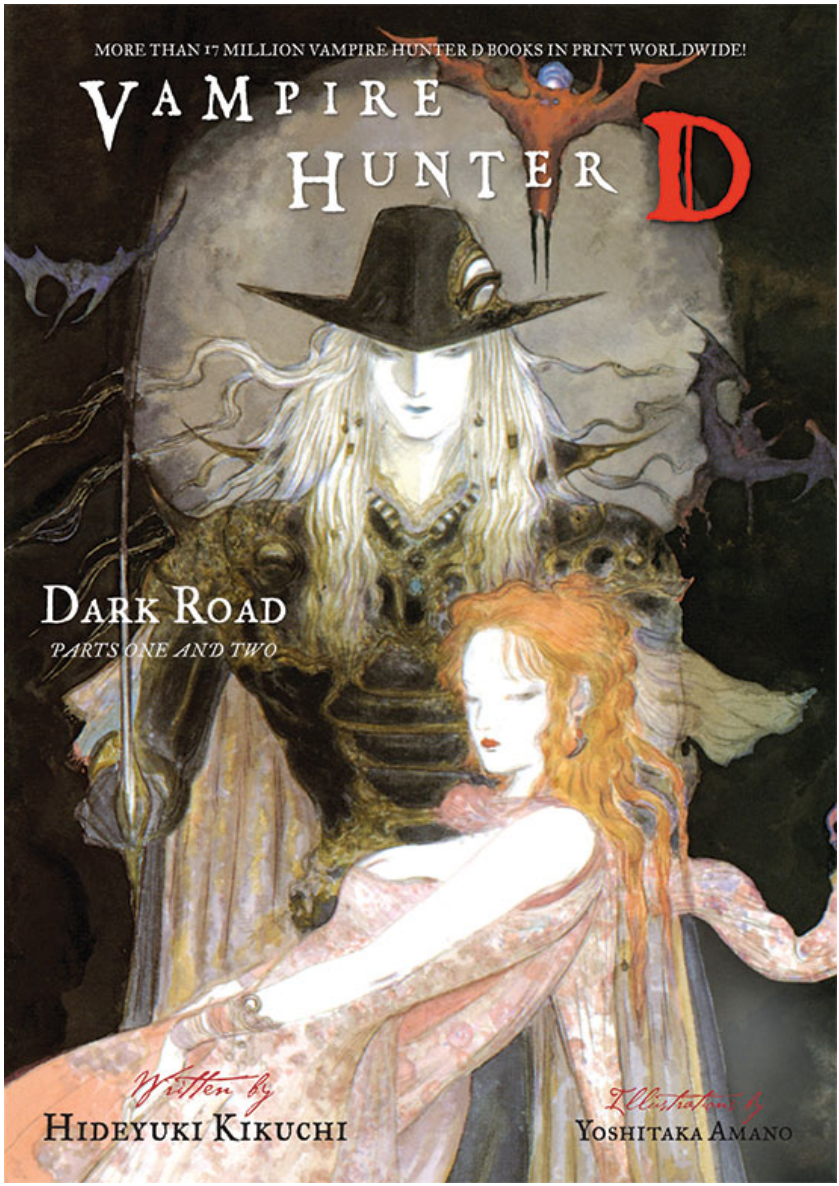
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DARK ROAD
PARTS ONE AND TWO
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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 14

DARK ROAD

PARTS ONE AND TWO

Written by

HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

Illustrations by

YOSHITAKA AMANO

English translation by

KEVIN LEAHY

Dark Horse Books®
Milwaukie

Digital Manga Publishing
Los Angeles

VAMPIRE HUNTER D 14: DARK ROAD
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Cover art by Yoshitaka Amano
English translation by Kevin Leahy
Book design by Krystal Hennes
Published by
Dark Horse Books
A division of Dark Horse Comics
10956 SE Main Street
Milwaukie OR 97222
darkhorse.com

Digital Manga Publishing
1487 West 178th Street, Suite 300
Gardena CA 90248
dmpbooks.com

ISBN 978-1-59582-440-0
ePub ISBN: 978-1-62115-500-3

First Dark Horse Books Edition: May 2010
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Printed at Lake Books Manufacturing, Inc., Melrose Park, IL, USA

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

Dark Road

PART ONE

ONE FROM THE VILLAGE OF THE DEAD

CHAPTER 1

I

The road lay in shadow. To either side of it were endless rolling plains. Though they were dotted with what looked to be rocky mountains and woods, these did nothing to lift the air of desolation. Spread with gray clouds, the sky occasionally carried the growl of distant thunder. It would probably rain.

All day a horse had been advancing through the wilderness. The continuous stretch of dull tones and identical scenery would drive all emotion from the heart of any rider in the saddle. Anger, joy, and sadness all fused with the ash-gray world, leaving a dull weariness in command of the soul. At times like this, travelers might even wish they were dead.

However, this rider was a gorgeous exception. The eyes beneath his wide-brimmed traveler's hat gave off a light that it seemed even the void would fear, and as he rode into an almost imperceptible breeze, the face he had turned forward was so beautiful it could convince anyone that it was not of this world. Men and women alike were paralyzed by it, and even the beasts undoubtedly adored him with one look. However, his beauty was such that all who saw him understood that when his black-gloved hand reached for the hilt of the curved sword peeking over his shoulder, he wouldn't be done until death colored the blade of his weapon.

Both the ashen sky and the ocher plains seemed to exist solely to highlight the rider's magnificence as he and his horse went down the highway. What awaited him at his destination—life or death?

When the grumbling of the heavens had grown quite close, a flickering image resembling a village began to take shape further down the road. The sea of clouds lit up. Blue zigzags connected the sky and earth, with thunder audible just a short while later.

Perhaps this was some signal to welcome the rider and his mount. For with that flash of light, the rider caught the stink of blood on the almost imperceptible wind. It had blown out of a village—a village that lay more than six miles away.

An hour later, the horse and rider came to the town. At the end of a smaller road that branched off to the right of the highway loomed a high palisade and a wooden gate. The gate was open. And the stench of blood definitely came from within.

The rider, however, showed no signs of turning his mount in its direction. Not displaying the slightest hesitation, he rode forward without revealing an ounce of fear. All he had for the village that stank of blood was a stern indifference. Had any survivors known of this, they might've held it against him for the rest of their lives. No, they would've undoubtedly forgone that. That way, they were spared having to choose death over a life of writhing pain.

After the young man had gone five or ten feet past the road to the

village, his ears caught a faint sound and a voice. The sound was footsteps, and the voice was that of a young woman.

"Help me!"

The young man's action betrayed the image he projected. Halting his horse, he tugged on the reins and wheeled it around. He gave a light kick of his heels to his mount's flanks, and the cyborg horse began to trot back in the opposite direction.

On passing through the gate, the rider was greeted by a scene like any other Frontier village. Wooden houses were scattered between the trees. There were a square and a well, stock pens and rows of storehouses. However, no one called out to the visitor, and there was no sign of vigilance-committee members to surround him with swords, spears, and firearms in hand.

The rider went straight down the main street of the village. But despite everything that was wrong about this scene, he didn't seem to raise so much as an eyebrow on his cold and beautiful visage.

On the left-hand side he saw the sign for the general store: *Yarai's*. It was the local branch of a chain that had stores far and wide across the Frontier. At the same time the horse halted in front, the door swung open from inside and a pale figure staggered out. Taking a couple of steps down the raised wooden sidewalk, she then thudded down on her face. Her flaming red hair shook.

Getting off his horse, the rider went over to the girl. Before he came to a stop, the girl put both hands against the sidewalk and tried to rise. Surely she'd noticed the rider's approach, but she didn't even look at him as she got back up. Though she was gritting her teeth, her face was that of a beautiful young lady of seventeen or eighteen. Rubbing her tear-wearied eyes with one hand, the girl then looked up at the rider. Her eyes instantly opened wide with fascination, and a rosy hue tinged her cheeks. For even mired as the girl was in weariness, resentment, and despair, the rider had a countenance so gorgeous it made her lose herself.

"Who are you?" the girl asked in a dazed tone. "I'm Rosaria."

"D."

Just then the wind blew by, stirring the young man's hair and making him hold down the brim of his hat.

"That sounds like someone saying goodbye," the girl—Rosaria—said, squinting her eyes.

"What happened?" D asked.

"Everyone's been killed," Rosaria replied weakly. With a pale finger she pointed to a black scarf around her neck. "You must know without even looking. There's a pair of teeth marks under this. I was bitten by a Noble."

The sky glittered. Half of the girl's face had a white glow to it while thunder rumbled in the distance.

"Show me," D said.

"No. I don't feel particularly good about it, and if you were to run off

on me, I wouldn't be able to go anywhere."

"I'm a Vampire Hunter."

Rosaria's eyes opened as far as they could go. Yet they still seemed to have a sort of gauze over them, due to the beauty of the young man before her.

"You're a Hunter . . . Would you by any chance be a dhampir?"

"Yes."

With that, Rosaria collapsed on the spot. The threads of tension that'd supported her had been cut. Shoulders rising and falling as she took a deep breath, she looked up at D with hatred in her eyes.

"So, this is the end for me?" she asked.

"Why do you say that?"

"Don't play innocent with me. I'm a *victim*. When a Vampire Hunter finds someone like that hanging around, he doesn't let it slide. It's your ilk who did this to the village!"

So, Vampire Hunters put the stench of blood all around the place?

"What happened?" D asked once again.

"Your colleagues came in and ran around killing everyone. That's all—why don't you see for yourself?"

Suddenly, Rosaria got right back up on her feet and headed for the door of the same general store she'd come out of. She acted as though her earlier call for help had just been the sound of the wind.

Stroking the neck of his horse, which seemed somewhat on edge, the Hunter then followed Rosaria.

The interior of the store was soaked in blood. Not the floor or the ceiling—the very air. By the counter, two villagers lay face down. Apparently they'd been attacked from behind, and the ends of iron stakes jutted from their backs. Judging by the length and thickness of them, the stakes had to weigh over twelve pounds each. Even if they'd caught these people off guard, the person who'd used them must've been endowed with incredible strength.

"Behind the counter is old man Meadow. He was the manager."

D had already caught the scent of another person's blood rising from back there. Turning to Rosaria, he asked, "Did you hide?"

The girl nodded. "I worked here part time. I was just in the middle of putting some sacks of flour into the storehouse out back. And then, all of a sudden, I heard these screams."

Though she'd thought about coming out, her whole body had frozen. The screams had been that intense.

"Actually, they were screams from Mrs. Judd and Mrs. Laroque lying there. It's unbelievable the noises a person makes when they're dying . . . Then there was the sound of something hitting the floor, and old Mr. Meadow said, 'Who sent you?' But right after that—"

"Wasn't there an answer?"

"Not a word. Once I heard the manager fall, there was some laughter. I'm sure there were four of them."

Terrified as she was, this innocent young redhead had still been able to deduce their number from the murderers' voices.

"I was paralyzed in the storehouse. And then I saw this huge flesh-eating rat down by my feet. It didn't surprise me, but it managed to knock over a mountain of canned goods. I—I was certain I was dead. They came into the storehouse!"

"How did you survive?"

"I don't know," Rosaria replied, shaking her head. "I just pressed my back up against the storehouse wall like so and shut my eyes. I was so nervous I thought my heart would stop. Now, that storehouse is a little prefab job that couldn't hold three people. I knew as soon as they came in I'd be right in front of them. They absolutely had to have seen me. Yet all they did was grunt about how there was no one there, and then they just left."

After he'd finished listening to her, D spun around and stepped outside. Crossing the street, he went into the saloon in the middle of the block. It was a bloodbath in there, too. Nearly a dozen men lay in their own blood. Stakes jutted from their backs or chests, and there were three decapitated corpses.

"Not a single person escaped, you know," Rosaria said in a hoarse voice, having followed him there.

Undoubtedly these sudden attackers always prided themselves on being exceptionally skilled at slaughter. One corpse stood over by the wall with a hand going for the machete on his hip. He'd been killed while trying to resist. A stake about a foot and a half long nailed him to the wall, right through the heart. The man over by the window who'd been impaled with arms still outstretched had obviously made an attempt to escape.

"They must've been remarkably fast," Rosaria said, shaking her head.

It was obvious that, having wielded those heavy stakes so easily and slaughtered ten people in a split second without letting anyone escape, they weren't average Hunters. What's more, they hadn't pulled the stakes back out. Each must've had a number of them—how many pounds of weapons did they carry around?

"Have you seen the heads?" D asked.

His question related to the decapitated corpses. Although it seemed a shocking query to put to a girl of her age, this was the Frontier. And it was D asking.

"I've seen nothing of the sort!" Rosaria said, turning her face away.

Had the butchers carried them away, then? For what purpose?

D went outside.

"After they left, I went around and checked every house in the village. The massacre was complete. Not a single person was left alive. Our village didn't have much of a population to begin with. Wherever you go, you'll find nothing but corpses here."

"How about the women and children?"

Rosaria closed her eyes and shook her head. The winds of death had

blown off with every life in the village, irrespective of age or sex.

"Did you see the killers?" D asked as he looked across the street.

"Nope. You can laugh if you like, but—I didn't leave the storehouse. At least, not until the sound of their horses and wagon had gone down the road to the gate. But while I was in there, I heard screams and shouts and people begging for their lives outside the whole time."

"Was it an ordinary wagon?"

"Now that you mention it, there was a huffing sound like steam."

The reason D had asked must've been because he'd seen the number of deep ruts that'd been left in the dirt of the street.

"Do you know who they were?"

Not answering that, D asked her, "How long has the village been going?"

Rosaria's eyes gave off a troubling gleam, but she soon seemed to give in, saying, "I guess there's no point in hiding it from you, is there? Apparently, it's been about fifty years. They took a village that'd fallen into disrepair and patched it up. You know, don't you? That this was a village for victims."

"They all had scarves on," D replied.

Taking off any one of them would've exposed a pair of fang wounds.

"Why didn't you look underneath? When you see a person with a scarf around his neck, isn't it perfectly natural for a Hunter to tear it off and check, even if that person happens to be one of your own parents? All the Hunters I've ever known would've done that."

"What was the population of the village?" D asked her.

"Two hundred—or a few over that."

"Were you planning on seeing to them?"

It took the girl a few seconds to grasp the meaning of those words.

"You'd bury them?" she said, her eyes quickly filling with tears. "I can't believe it. You're a Vampire Hunter, aren't you? Isn't it your job to kill people like us?"

"There isn't enough time to bury them. We'll cremate them."

Rosaria nodded and sent glittering bits flying.

"It doesn't matter which it is. Just so long as they get a proper human sendoff. I'm sure they'd appreciate that. Thank you."

II

"Victim" was the term generally used to describe people who'd been fed upon by the Nobility but had been left, for whatever reason, before the job was done. Ordinarily they were banished from villages and isolated under strict surveillance, or else quickly disposed of. Although there were people who had no qualms about driving a stake through the heart of someone who up until a day earlier had been a friend or relative, they were few and far between. Some villages employed special "cleaners." It was unavoidable that this task occasionally fell to Vampire Hunters, but at the same time

they were probably also perfectly suited to the job.

However, these victims didn't merely wait for death.

A vacant gaze, a predilection for seeking shade to escape the sunlight, a fondness for wandering in dark forests, and an unpredictable thirst for blood—these were the characteristics of those who'd become slaves of the Nobility, and they'd been recognized since the ancient time when the Nobility had first made themselves the rulers of the earth. Some victims exhibited a number of these symptoms and others lacked them entirely, but they might escape a speedy death at the hands of their own kind and flee to someplace where no one knew them. However, they couldn't hide the wounds on their throats. Due to the unholy nature of the vampire, they could burn the wounds with flames, melt them with acid, or even have the flesh surgically removed and replaced with a graft of new tissue, but like the immortals who'd left them there, the wounds would suddenly regenerate.

Inevitably, the victims had no choice but to conceal the marks left by that accursed kiss with a scarf or something similar. For the uninfected, that in itself became the way of distinguishing who'd been bitten. Thus, they were also banished from new areas and sent far into the mountains or deep into thick forests to seek a life in ruins of antiquity, cursed and shunned by others.

By the time they'd used a wagon to collect all the corpses in the village and lined them up on the edge of town, the light had fled completely from the afternoon sky. But in this world ruled by darkness, the two continued to work without pause. For Rosaria, like D, had the darkness-piercing vision of the Nobility.

Once they'd piled up the more than two hundred corpses, Rosaria watched gloomily as D splashed them with high-octane fuel, but she didn't try to avert her gaze from his harsh duty. The fuel had been buried on the outskirts of the village for use in case of an emergency. Everything else had been carted off.

D took out a light stick. One swing brought dazzling flames from the end of the eight-inch baton of concentrated chemicals.

Rosaria spoke. "They were all such good people. I thought I'd spend the rest of my life in this village."

D might've been waiting for that. There were several seconds of silence—and then the fire was tossed.

The glow pulled their forms out of the darkness and danced across them. The flames were flickering. Burning at a hundred thousand degrees, the flames looked like a blinding mirage. And within them, the forms of the victims crumbled away without a sound.

"Goodbye, everybody," Rosaria said, but she shed no more tears. She'd run dry.

Although she knew she wanted to say something, the words wouldn't come out.

Instead, D said to her, “What will you do?”

If anyone who knew him had heard that question, it would’ve made them doubt their own ears. The very thought of this young man asking someone else’s opinion!

“Can’t stay here. I wanna go west. There’s this village named Valhalla. Ever heard of it? I don’t suppose you’d happen to be headed the same way, would you?”

“I am.”

“Really?” Rosaria exclaimed, her face instantly brightened by joy. “Well, in that case—take me with you.”

“I’m the same as those who killed your friends.”

“No,” she shot back. As she said the next part, Rosaria realized she actually meant it. “You’re different. I can tell. I like to think I can read people. You’re really scary. You’re probably a lot more merciless and terrifying than the ones who killed everybody, but you’re definitely not a bad person.”

“Go straight down this highway here. After about thirty miles, you’ll hit Dodge Town. Ask there about the rest of the way.”

“Say, you don’t mean to just leave me here, do you?”

“If there’s nothing wrong with your legs, you can walk,” D told her.

“Wait a minute. I—I’m a victim! A poor invalid. Don’t you wanna protect me?”

“As long as you can walk in the light of the sun, you’ll manage,” D said, turning his back to her coldly.

Gazing absentmindedly at his back as he walked away, fascinated as she watched him go, the girl turned after a while to the flames scorching the heavens and chanted a prayer, then began to hurry after him.

She caught up to him in front of the general store.

“You sure do walk fast, you know that?”

The girl was referring to the fact that even running as quickly as she could, she couldn’t match his pace. And it’d looked for all the world as if D was just walking normally. He wasn’t even taking long strides, yet she hadn’t been able to gain any ground on him at all. The only reason she’d finally managed to catch up was because D himself had halted.

“You know, you’re just being horrible! Leaving a girl my age to—” Rosaria had begun to shout when her tongue froze.

A cluster of lights was approaching from the direction of the gate.

Rosaria trembled.

There was a sound. *Huff, huff, huff!*

Before it'd stopped not three feet from her with a shrill gasp of steam, Rosaria saw what it was: a vehicle hung with a number of lights. The huffing sounds of steam came from the cylinder on the back half of it—a boiler.

The shadowy figures who clung to the vehicle like insects climbed down in unison. The air shook; there wasn't a sound. And the only way to describe the men was to say they were remarkably athletic. Each wore a cotton shirt and a vest with a staggering number of pockets, and over their eyes they wore thick night-vision goggles.

"Are they there?" D inquired.

He was asking Rosaria whether or not the murderers were present.

"No, they're not," she answered him instantly.

Rosaria was peeking out from behind D's back.

"But their outfits are similar, and their vehicle's exactly the same."

"Looks like our forerunners left one alive, I'd say," one of the shadowy figures remarked in a cold tone. It was the sort of voice that made his cruel and callous nature perfectly clear. "We would've gone right on by, too, if not for those flames. But if we don't wipe out every last one of the Nobility's playmates, the good little villagers won't be able to sleep all safe and sound."

The men's hands went in unison for the weapons on their hips. Bastard swords, short spears, stake guns, throwing knives—though all their weapons were nicked and grimy and spoke volumes of the hard use they'd seen day in and day out for quite some time, it still wasn't proof they'd ever been used against the Nobility.

Nobles were something else entirely. A lot of punks called themselves Vampire Hunters, but when it came down to how many of them had actually gone toe to toe with the creatures of the night, it was less than 1 percent.

"W-what, you'd even kill a girl? To hell with that!" Rosaria cried. "See, I've got myself a strong bodyguard."

"Well, he certainly is one hell of a pretty boy," the man said, his voice having the ring of rapture to it.

Giving his head a good shake to drive out the impeding thoughts, he turned his eyes to D's neck and said, "From the look of it, you're not a victim. If you're just passing by, you'd better beat it. I can't say what's gonna happen next will be a very pretty sight."

"You know, they're out to kill me!" Rosaria said, clinging to the hem of D's coat.

Glaring at the men, she shouted, "Why would you kill us? What did we ever do?"

"Once your blood's been sucked, you're in with the Nobility. You get a whole bunch of you people gathering together, and upstanding folks can't

live in peace no more."

"What makes you say there's something wrong with us? We were just living here quietly without bothering anyone, weren't we?"

"You've got the DNA of the Nobility in your blood. Everything might be quiet now, but there's no telling when you might show your fangs. And no one likes to take chances. Just accept it already."

The man drew a bastard sword from his hip. The blade was wide enough that it looked like it could behead a steer as well as a human, and it'd been so finely honed it appeared to have no thickness to it at all.

"I'll make it real quick for you. Okay, come on over here."

As the man beckoned with his other hand, he casually walked toward her.

"No! Help!" Rosaria cried, clinging to D's back.

Clucking his tongue, the man laid a hand on D's shoulder and tried to shove him aside.

D's hand covered the man's wrist.

The man had expected there might be trouble. As he raised his bastard sword, he did so with the joy of getting exactly what he'd wanted.

His blade halted in midair. The pain shooting through his wrist was more than anything he could've imagined.

He couldn't speak, but in his stead, the others did.

"Son of a bitch!"

"You looking to get yourself murdered?"

Reaching for their respective weapons, the men behind him surrounded the pair without another sound. Their formation was exquisite —this didn't happen without day after day of strict training.

Someone let out a gasp. It came from the man who'd had his wrist pinned, who'd just been tossed headlong in the direction D was facing. Two or three others caught him, but the man collapsed to the ground.

"Both his arms are limp as noodles!" another man shouted.

His arms were broken at the shoulder, elbow, and wrist. But when? No one had seen it happen.

Once again all eyes focused on D, but they weren't filled with the confidence and intimidation of conceited bullies. Confronted by the unknown, something deeper and stronger than fear prickled against their skin—actual terror. There were those who could do the same trick they'd just encountered. One of them had actually seen someone do it somewhere. However, all of the men sensed that the master who stood before them was a whole different creature from them.

Still, their firm will to fight got a handle on the fear in an instant. Adrenaline flowed into their veins.

"Back to your senses," D said, but of course his words weren't meant as advice.

Failing to grasp his meaning, the men took glittering weapons in hand and made a mad rush at him. Behind them, other men braced themselves for a deadly volley from their stake and rivet guns.

A second later, an ear-splitting scream rang out.

Four men reeled backward—all of them men who'd rushed D. Jabbed into their heads, necks, or shoulders were their own blades or those of their compatriots. Not only that, but at the instant their screams arose, cries had also rung out from those behind them with guns ready. For the bastard sword one of the staggering men gripped had split their throats open.

The flames illuminated only two men now. Ten people had been reduced to two in a split second. They weren't quite aware of how incredible this was—they couldn't be.

The deadly silence was broken by Rosaria's enthusiastic cry of, "Get 'em, D!"

The survivors' eyes were open as far as they could go.

What had the girl just said? D? It couldn't be *that* D, could it? Not *the* Vampire Hunter D?

If the men had been ordinary Hunters, they probably would've either collapsed on the spot and wet themselves or else run off without a backward glance. However, the second their will to fight was lost to a terror that knew no bounds, a trick of the mind turned the two men into robots no longer governed by emotion.

Taking his short spear under one arm, one of them made a thrust with it, while the other simultaneously hurled his bastard sword.

If someone were to elaborate on the events that unfolded a heartbeat later, it probably would've gone something like this: Turning sideways to avoid the spear one man was thrusting at him, D used his left elbow to deliver an uppercut to the man's chin. The blow came with such power that the man's body, weighing more than 170 pounds, went straight up in the air. Perhaps D had calculated it so that the bastard sword flying at him would take the man right through the heart. The man was killed instantly, but a split second before he died, the Hunter took the short spear from him and hurled it at the remaining man. There was nothing the man could do to prevent that steel spearhead from piercing his larynx.

Before the men had even fallen, the fight was over. However, three thuds echoed from the ground. For the battle had proven so ghastly that, watching the situation from behind D's back, Rosaria had fainted dead away.

III

The darkness that night was different from usual—it was filled with the glow of flames and the stink of blood. But only one person stood there in beautiful brilliance, the same one who'd unleashed the scent of blood into the air.

Without even looking at the deadly scene he'd created, D walked over toward where his horse was tethered in front of the general store. Even Rosaria was left behind. He hadn't fought for her sake. The instant the man who'd been after her laid a hand on D's shoulder, death had spread its

black wings over the men's heads.

After he'd gone two or three paces, a voice that sounded like someone dead and buried echoed up from the ground behind him, saying, "She called you D, right?"

It was the man with the two broken arms. Although he'd been the catalyst for this bloodbath, he was the only one of them who'd survived it.

"Always thought . . . I'd like to meet you someday . . . But this is what I get . . . eh? My name is Quinn. I work for Grays."

D put the saddle resting near the horse on his mount's back. He never even halted.

"Wait . . . please. This area's got a lot of dangerous creatures. Take me with you . . . please."

The Hunter and his horse began to walk away.

Somehow, the man—Quinn—managed to get back up again using only his legs.

"It's true . . . These last six months . . . the number of monsters has increased like mad . . . This used to be a safe zone . . . but now . . ."

While the man was speaking, the rider in black and his white steed had gone to within a few yards of the gate.

The man's shoulders fell despondently.

The clomping of hooves stopped. Halting, D soon turned back toward the village. His horse began to walk again.

Above them, a black shape bounded.

Fwiiish! the wind snarled.

The shadowy form was split lengthwise, and a black liquid that wasn't the form itself spread in the air like ink. The halves of the form that lay on the ground were covered with black bristles and had trenchant claws exposed.

Quinn hadn't been lying.

From D's back there was the slight click of sword hilt against scabbard.

Advancing on his horse as if nothing had happened, the Hunter dismounted by Rosaria. With her unconscious form over one shoulder, he easily got back on his mount, this time heading straight for the gate.

"I'm begging you . . . It's about my future . . . Please, just wait," Quinn said, his voice seeming to creep across the ground. "I was always prepared . . . to die anywhere . . . but now I've got a reason not to die . . . In the village of Valhalla . . . I've got a girl. It's been five years since I left . . . and I was on my way back there."

How did it sound to D, hearing the name of a village he'd already heard once repeated now?

Halting his horse, he turned to the left—in the direction of the steam-powered vehicle.

At that point, what could only be described as a hoarse voice clearly rang out in the darkness from the hand that gripped the reins. "As always, you're such a softy!"

The mocking voice left Quinn down on the ground feeling terribly

relieved.

The car's interior was both strangely cramped and strangely hot. There wasn't room for more than two people to ride in it to begin with, and heat from the steam boiler intruded mercilessly. When over capacity, it must've been more comfortable for those who had to ride on the outside.

From the way D looked at the cockpit, Quinn had guessed that it was his first time driving, but on seeing how easily the Hunter mastered the controls after making only one or two mistakes, the man was quite naturally left dumbfounded.

The cyborg horse followed along meekly. It wasn't tethered to the vehicle.

The common school of thought was that you didn't travel by night. The darkness impenetrable to human eyes held numerous supernatural beasts and monsters filled solely with boundless hunger and murderous intent. However, no earthly school of thought applied to the handsome young man behind the wheel.

Rosaria soon regained consciousness. On seeing Quinn the eyes nearly popped out of her head, but Quinn explained his situation to her . . . only he left out the part about having a woman in Valhalla.

Sure enough, Rosaria tore into him.

"Why should we help a murderer like *you*? You deserve to get a taste of your own medicine and feel the same terror that everyone you killed felt. You'd know what that was like if we left you behind in the dark forest for about five minutes!"

"Shut your hole, little girl!" Quinn bellowed back, his own mouth open about as wide as it would go. "I make my living as a Vampire Hunter. Taking care of the half-dead who've been drained by the Nobility is my job. I'm warning you, you'd better not set foot outta this car so long as you're traveling with me!"

"No, *you* shut up! What's a no-talent bum like you supposed to do when you can't even move your arms?"

Rosaria's right hand raced toward his bearded face—and met with empty air.

"Take that! You . . . you . . . you . . ."

The slap didn't ring out until her sixth swing.

Quinn staggered. Rosaria was a lot stronger than he'd expected.

"I knew it! You're a monster bitch!" he howled with loathing.

Since he called himself a Hunter, his reflexes should've been keen enough to keep a woman or child from striking him. There could be only one reason why she'd landed a hit on him. Rosaria's speed was that of neither a woman nor a child.

"I knew you were part of the Nobility after all! Just try walking down a normal street with those marks on your neck. You wouldn't last a minute. You'd be better off letting me kill you now."

"The hell I would! Why don't you try killing D, then? Think you could?

After all, he's a dhampir, you know!"

A second later, Rosaria turned in D's direction and said, "Oh, no! I went and told him!"

His beautiful back to her, the Hunter didn't move a muscle as he said in a low voice, "He must have known anyway."

"Dear me!"

"Ha! This is one messed-up gang. Two Vampire Hunters and a victim. And two out of the three have the blood of Nobility in 'em," Quinn sneered. "That being the case, traveling by night should be safe enough. It's when the two of you do your thing, after all. Hey, don't let me get in the way. Why don't you find a little farmhouse hereabouts and go drink their blood?"

Rosaria was so incensed her whole body shook.

"You dirty bastard! D, say something!"

There was no reply.

"See? What did I tell you? I'm not surprised he knows his place. Now, you've also gotta—"

The voice of the night flashed out like a blade.

"Be quiet."

That was enough to leave both of them with expressions like those of the dead.

"Have you ever walked the road at night until daybreak? If not, you'd better settle down."

His meaning dawned on them both instantaneously—the man and woman were, indeed, residents of the Frontier. The two of them squeezed themselves into the narrow space between the seat cushion and the dashboard.

"What is it?" Quinn asked.

Rising to his feet unconsciously, he peered out ahead of them through the windshield. His goggles still worked. But right away, he groaned.

From the left-hand side, a pale little figure had suddenly stepped right out into the middle of the road.

"We've got trouble here!" Quinn shouted, his whole body tensing.

"Help . . . me!" cried a tiny voice that echoed in the depths of their ears.

"She's just an ordinary girl!" Rosaria called over to D in the driver's seat.

They were less than thirty feet from her.

"Stop the car!"

The girl turned in their direction. With smooth, rosy cheeks, wavy black tresses, a dress torn in a number of places, and an absolutely terrified expression on her face as she sought succor—she was so cute, it wouldn't have been strange for even the most cold-hearted deity to make an exception in the case of this girl.

The vehicle kept heading right for her. It hadn't slowed down yet and showed no sign of ever doing so.

“Don’t!” Rosaria cried, picturing the girl being crushed horribly beneath the black wheels of the vehicle.

But a second later, the girl was flying through the air. The instant she’d risen as high as D’s forehead, her right hand flashed into action just as the Hunter’s sword raced out of its scabbard. Without a word from the girl, her body split down the center, and something like white petals rained onto the black ground.

“What was that?” Rosaria shouted from the back. “When she flew up, she had the scariest look on her face. She was a monster, wasn’t she?”

“You just figured that out, you dolt?” Quinn sneered. “What are the chances of a girl just happening to be out in the road at this hour waiting for someone to drive along? Of course it’s a monster! It was simply waiting for some kind heart like you to get all sentimental and stop her car. It’d tear us to shreds with its fangs and claws. What the—”

Suddenly they picked up speed, and Rosaria grabbed the leather strap beside her. Quinn narrowly managed to maintain his balance.

“What’s going on?” Quinn asked as he leaned over the driver’s seat.

“We’re being followed.”

D’s quiet reply only served to instill all the more fear in him.

Quinn and Rosaria both looked out the back window.

“What?”

“No way!”

Something pale in the air was chasing after them. Despite the darkness, they could see everything with perfect clarity, just as they had before. The black hair, the pink skin, the cute face—it was the same girl.

However, needlelike teeth jutted from the mouth that now rent her face from ear to ear, and the claws that stretched from her fingertips looked to be about as long as her arms. More than anything, what dug talons into the hearts of both were the green flames that burned in her eyes. Her hatred made fire shoot from them. While the way she reached out with one hand and wriggled her body as if swimming through the air looked rather cute, she was also ten times more horrifying than any ordinary monster.

“She’s gonna catch us!” Quinn shouted.

The distance between the vehicle and the girl was most definitely shrinking. A supernatural creature versus a product of civilization—in this world, the former always won.

Quinn reached for the broadsword on his right hip—and groaned. His arms were still broken, after all.

And that was when Rosaria gasped, her eyes startled.

The girl’s body began to slip apart right down the middle—that was the only way to describe what was happening. Rosaria saw that her left half had fallen about a hand’s width behind her right.

“She was cut by D!” she exclaimed.

Precisely. The body of the flying girl had tasted D’s blade, and now, perhaps having lost its ability to rejoin, it split in two.

The girl wrapped her arms around herself. On her face, as plain as day, were bottomless malice and loathing—and a hint of pain.

"Hurry!"

Rosaria's cry almost seemed to reinvigorate the flying girl. Her distance from the car decreased even further, until the girl was just outside the window—they could've reached out and touched her. Blazing eyes were trained on the two of them. Her left hand reached out with its claws.

There was a hard clack against the glass. The tips of her claws had struck it.

Rosaria curled up in a ball.

But not a second later, the flying girl suddenly pulled away. Perhaps her power was spent, because the last thing the two of them saw was the two halves of her adorable form flying apart in midair.

FANGS OF RUIN

CHAPTER 2

I

Relief surged into the hearts of both the man and the woman—but it vanished again immediately. Not only did the vehicle show no signs of slowing down, it was actually gaining speed. Fierce vibrations shot through the pair from the soles of their feet all the way to the tops of their heads, and through the window glass the snarling echoes of the wind clawed at their eardrums.

Still hanging onto a hand strap, Rosaria said angrily, “Hey! If we keep zipping along at this speed, won’t we catch up to those murderous friends of yours?”

“We might, I suppose. So what if we do? You thinking about settling a score with ’em?” the bearded man sneered back at her.

“Yeah. I’ll drain every last one of them dry,” Rosaria replied, baring her teeth.

Quinn’s smile disappeared.

Every inch of the young woman was tinged with an air of rage. Pointing a finger at Quinn, Rosaria declared, “Just remember this: you’ll be the last to get it!”

“You don’t say!” Quinn replied, a nasty look on his face. “In that case, there’s no need to wait till we catch up to them. Settle up with me here and now!”

“Oh, that sounds like fun. You think you can handle me without your grubby little hands?”

They weren’t joking, and this wasn’t an act. Murderous intent radiated from every inch of Quinn, and Rosaria’s eyes gave off a red gleam as she stood with her fingers curled like claws in front of her chest. The fight that ensued would be the real deal, and it would be to the death. But it was preempted by the tortured shriek of the brakes. This time, they weren’t braced for it. Both of them went flying forward, slamming into the divider between them and the front seat.

“What the hell? You drive like shit!”

“Yeah! Are you trying to kill us?” they snapped, their deadly battle now forgotten.

But what the Hunter said in a far lower and more tranquil tone silenced them: “This is the wrong way.”

Somehow managing to fight the feeling he was being taunted, Quinn turned to the divider and shouted, “Are you sure you’re really D?”

The skill with which his colleagues had been dispatched gave him the answer to that question. Better yet, Quinn needed only to consider his own two arms.

“Stay there,” they heard D say.

“Hey, open the door!” Quinn ordered Rosaria, who was rubbing her shoulder.

Giving him a look that could kill, the young woman replied, “What gives you the right to order me around like a king? Why don’t you open it yourself?”

“Because I can’t move my arms.”

“Really? In that case, I’ll move them for you!”

“Gaaaah!” Quinn exclaimed, bending backward in pain. A kick from Rosaria had connected with his right elbow. In the narrow confines of the vehicle, there was no way he could’ve avoided it.

Looking down frostily at the man as he writhed in pain, Rosaria spat, “Do you get it now? In this world, the strong survive. And I’ll give a taste of the same to your friends shortly. Just like *they* did to the villagers.”

And then she opened the door. The first thing that caught her eye was the glowing moon. The disk was nearly full, and its light seemed to exist solely to emphasize the beauty of the young man in black standing beneath it. Perhaps it was that beauty that drew Rosaria out of the vehicle. The air was sweet and fresh—much sweeter and fresher than by day.

Taking in her surroundings, she waited a bit before saying, “Where are we?” She sounded unsettled as she made her query.

At some point, sheer walls a hundred yards high had surrounded them. Their rock surface had a jewel-like luster in the moonlight. They were at the bottom of a ravine, yet it was strangely spacious—the rich black earth must’ve covered at least an acre.

D waited in a spot about fifteen feet from the vehicle, though it was unclear what he was looking at. All the young man had to do was stand in the moonlight with the wind blowing around him—which probably wasn’t the wisest thing to do given their current situation—and he created a scene worthy of a picture scroll. A skilled artist might’ve even been able to depict how the wind swooned when it touched him.

Even Rosaria forgot about their predicament. *I just want to stay here like this*, she thought so intensely it hurt.

“Go back,” D said.

His cold tone shocked Rosaria back to her senses, planting seeds of anger at the same time. “Why?” she asked, and she was in the process of sidling up to the Hunter when the ground by her feet moved violently.

When her eyes turned down in shock, they spied a black shape pushing its way up out of the sand. The way one end of it appeared first made it look like a submarine.

“Isn’t that—a coffin?”

A black-gloved hand wound around the waist of the dumbfounded Rosaria, and the Hunter dashed with her toward the vehicle. Ahead of them, sand was erupting, and with each burst a black wooden box appeared as if to block their path.

Surveying her surroundings with fear-filled eyes and realizing that the rising black coffins covered the entire bottom of the ravine, Rosaria was horrified.

“What on earth’s going on here, D?”

Though it may come as a strange compliment, she truly was a victim. Her voice didn't even tremble as she spoke.

"This is where victims make their home."

"Huh?"

Now wide with surprise, her eyes reflected a new scene. The lids of the coffins opened in unison. Without a second's delay, those inside sat up. Pale faces with vacant eyes and vermilion lips that looked painted with blood—they were indeed victims of the Nobility. However, there were some among them shriveled more like dead branches than mummies, their eyes, noses, and mouths seemingly buried beneath wrinkles.

Pointing at one of them, Rosaria asked, "What's the story with that stick figure?"

"That's a victim from the earliest times," D said. "They gathered here in this valley to try to lead an existence that was neither life nor death. Victims who don't turn into Nobility can live without seeking human blood, and they age at a far slower pace than they would ordinarily. Surely that's one who's spent all this time in the valley without slaking the thirst for blood."

"How horrible . . ." Rosaria murmured, her words tinged with sympathy.

"D," she started to say, the expression on her face announcing she'd come to some sort of decision.

But just then, a hoarse voice laced with cracks said, "There's a man . . ."

"And a woman," another voice was heard to say off in the distance.

"Humans have come here. Where is my father?"

"How about my mother?"

"What of my beloved?"

They looked all around them before dejectedly turning their gazes back on the pair.

"There's no one else here . . . except those two."

"No one else, eh?"

"No one."

"In that case—"

"In that case—"

"In that case—"

Their voices called to mind a chorus composed of every trick the wind had ever played.

"In that case—give us blood!"

All extended their arms simultaneously. Slowly, vainly, they curled their fingers, opened their hands, then curled those fingers again as they drew the hands back. They stopped when their hands reached their chests, poised to snatch and rend.

Nearby, someone snarled like a beast. Turning, the girl saw that sharp incisors poked out from the lips the being was licking. A few of them were just shy of turning into Nobility.

Four or five of the closest attacked D and Rosaria with unbelievable speed. Silvery light danced out. Black blood swirled in the wind. The victims fell to the ground, clutching their throats.

With the same blade that'd tapped fountains of blood still in hand, D glanced at the shadowy figures behind the fallen. Poised to latch onto something, the victims staggered back. Their foul aura was being beaten into submission by the Hunter's air of beauty.

"Get back in the car," D said, giving Rosaria's back a shove.

After stumbling forward three or four steps, Rosaria froze in her tracks.

The car was less than ten feet away, but between her and it were a coffin and a person. A woman. Swaying black hair hung down to the waist of her filthy shroud. Though she had the withered face of a crone, on closer inspection she was actually still young.

Rosaria's legs wouldn't move. Something hot welled in her eyes.

The woman opened her mouth. It was as empty and black as a cavern. Withered like a dried persimmon, her gums didn't hold a single tooth. Except for a pair of fangs, that is.

"You . . . you're . . . I'm . . ."

As the girl groaned, a withered pair of hands reached for her. The pain of those fingers digging into her was horribly acute. A hint of emotion surfaced in the woman's muddied eyes, and her hands came away from the girl's shoulders. With fresh blood spraying from her throat like the spouting of a river whale, the woman tumbled backward.

"D—"

Even before Rosaria saw the handsome young man with sword in hand, he'd wrapped a powerful arm around her waist, easily carried her back to the vehicle, opened the door, and then roughly tossed her in like so much baggage. The door was then closed.

Springing back up, she peered out the window. What she saw was the mob of victims pressing closer and D's back as he faced them.

"This is a freaking nest of victims," Quinn said, turning a tense face to her. "And nasty ones at that—they've all nearly turned into Nobility. Gathered here to lure in humans and drain their blood, I'd say."

Staring at Rosaria with an expression somewhere between scorn and rage, he continued, "You sure you sickos didn't already know about these things and just let 'em keep right on doing it?"

"No," Rosaria said. "They're not like that . . . Those people—"

"They ain't people."

"They are, too!"

Bloodshot eyes met teary ones—and sparks flew in the air. Catching something out of the corners of their eyes, both of them looked out the window in surprise.

"I'll be damned!" Quinn exclaimed.

Rosaria swallowed hard and couldn't say anything.

His black coat fluttering out in the moonlight like a cape, D was

coming back. His sword had already been returned to its sheath, and there wasn't a single victim left standing behind him.

Upon seeing the vast number of men and women lying there, Rosaria groaned in a hoarse tone, "That's horrible!"

D got back into the driver's seat without even glancing at the pair in the vehicle, and with a ferocious pistoning sound, the car began retracing the route by which it'd come.

II

Returning to the highway, D stopped the vehicle, turned to the pair, and said, "Wait here."

"You've gotta be freaking kidding me! I ain't about to be left here in the middle of the night with a bunch of pseudo-Nobility. I got no use of my arms. And on top of that, those things back there will probably come after us!"

"Who the hell would want to go after a jerk like you?" Rosaria spat at him, and then she turned a wrathful gaze on D. "You know, folks like that might not be human, but they're not monsters either. So why'd you kill them so horribly?"

"He didn't kill them."

"What?" Rosaria said, turning around.

A thin smile surfaced on Quinn's lips as he put his index finger to his throat. "Slashing victims open *here* is the best way to keep them off their feet. You're one of them, and you mean to tell me you didn't even know that? By now the wounds will have closed and they'll be bumping around in that murky valley none the worse for wear."

Rosaria turned to D again, slack jawed.

Quinn resumed his complaint, saying, "Which is why I said I ain't about to be left here. Why didn't you just go ahead and wipe 'em all out?"

"There's no need to do that. Victims will—" Rosaria started to say, but then she held her tongue. Because anything she had to say about the victims would also pertain to herself.

"What's the problem? Just come out and say it!" Quinn sneered at her while leaning against the back of the driver's seat. "Victims will drink their own—"

A hard crack reverberated from the man's jaw.

"D?" Rosaria said, staring at his hand as he pulled it back into the front seat.

"Have you ever heard of them leaving the valley?" D inquired as he got to his feet.

"No."

"How about travelers going missing?"

"No."

"They've been living in that valley. But there are times when their desire for blood makes them lure passing travelers down there. Bright

moonlit nights like tonight, for example."

Rosaria said nothing, but nodded. Feelings of empathy she didn't fully comprehend kept her from speaking.

The truth that everyone knew yet none would speak. That something human beings found repulsive was simply one means of survival for victims —drinking their own blood. Or that of their fellow victims.

Though in many cases victims resigned themselves to their fate and awaited their hour of destiny in a quarantine area on the outskirts of their village, more than a few still clung to life and decided to escape. Perhaps it was some sort of supernatural power they gained while being transformed into Nobility that allowed them to meet up with others of their kind. When two of them happened to cross paths and headed off together to find some forsaken place to live, other victims in the same situation would collect there as if blown by the wind, and they would form a community. If the human portion of their mind was strong they might subsist off farming and hunting, but the Noble blood that flowed in their veins wouldn't allow their hunger to be sated by the blood of animals. They needed the blood of something else. And while this terrific struggle took place between the human and Noble within them, each of them realized the same thing: their own blood remained human. As did that of their compatriots.

And people found that repulsive. It was this practice of feeding on themselves and their neighbors that caused humans to set fire to any community of victims they discovered without preamble. In highlands where the shadow of humanity rarely fell, at the ends of the earth, and on isolated islands, cries rang out from those who stalked the victims, and blood swirled in the winds.

Those victims who'd been relatively unaffected by the Nobility would use special makeup to cover the wounds on their throats and take full advantage of their ability to walk in the light of day by living close to human villages. Instead of shunning contact, they could associate with ordinary people. It was said that on the Frontier alone several hundred communities like this remained. Rosaria's village had been one of them.

The victims swarming the valley hadn't, in fact, gone out and attacked human beings. They didn't seem to be luring travelers in, either. They'd merely stayed there peacefully, living off themselves. And D's group had only been drawn there by chance.

"What do you intend to do, D?" the girl asked, thinking all the while that it was to no avail. Her tone was so calm she stunned herself.

"I'm going back to your village to get some dynamite," D replied.

"What?"

"To block off the road into the valley."

"Really?"

"They've been fine up to now," D said. "But if they lure any travelers in, they'll end up bringing a mob armed with stakes down on themselves. They should be able to survive with their own kind."

Rosaria's eyes quickly began to fill with sparkling tears. "Yes, you're

right about that," she said, swiftly wiping them away.

Rosaria realized why the shriveled young woman who'd caught hold of her shoulder had then let her go. She'd recognized Rosaria was one of them. And Rosaria had known it, too.

"I'm sure they'll do fine. They won't cause the outside world any trouble, so I guess the best thing to do would be to isolate them. D, I'll wait here. Hurry up and go already."

The figure in black had gotten onto the cyborg horse standing beside the vehicle. Though Rosaria had been watching him all along, it'd happened with such speed she wasn't sure exactly how he'd done it.

"Stay right here," he said, leaving her with just those words on the dark road.

Almost an hour later, D returned with the echoes of iron-shod hooves. Halting his steed, D surveyed his surroundings. The car was gone. Quiet had returned to the darkness. The only one who might've driven the car was Rosaria. What could've happened?

"They're not here," a hoarse voice remarked from the left hand balled around the reins. "And there's no sign of those clowns who chased us. Does that mean they just took off on their own? No, I don't think that girl's one to go against your instructions. Ordinarily, I'd say someone coming down the highway had carried them away. Heh! It's been a pretty boring trip up till now, but it's finally getting interesting. But enough about that—you've already noticed, haven't you?"

Before the hoarse voice had finished, D had wheeled his mount around toward the road into the valley where they'd been earlier, for his nose had caught a faint scent drifting from far down the road. The smell of blood.

"An ordinary person wouldn't be able to tell, but that's the mark of a wholesale slaughter. So, what are you gonna do?"

In lieu of a reply to the snide voice from his left hand, D drove his spurs into his horse's flanks.

†

The valley was shrouded in the same stillness as the first time they'd entered it. The only difference was the rows of coffins on the ground. Lying black in the moonlight, they declared that this valley was the kingdom of the false dead. There was no sign of the car. From the back of his horse, D focused his gaze on the row of coffins. His beautiful eyes were filled with a gleam many would describe as ghastly.

It was a call to arms. There was something in the center of the valley. The ground suddenly rose in a mound, and a cloud of dust went up. Like water breaking in waves, the ground flew off to either side as the cloud zipped forward. Something was burrowing underground!

The figure in black flew out into moonlight—D had leapt down. Having been given a kick to the flanks, his horse raced on at a good pace.

Now on the ground, D gripped his longsword in his right hand.

The cloud of dust changed direction. Its speed surpassed that of the cyborg horse.

D didn't move—and a second later, his form was swallowed by the black cloud. A sharp wave passed through the air. Leaving D behind, the cloud of dust raced off toward the entrance to the valley. Soon, it'd been swallowed by the darkness. D sheathed his sword without saying a word.

"That sure was something!" the hoarse voice said. Whether it was referring to D's display of skill or lauding the underground foe was unclear.

Bright blood gushed from D's left thigh.

"A quarter inch to the right and it would've severed a major artery. But it let out a scream, too. Guess it bit off more than it could chew, eh?"

Not replying, D pressed his left hand to the wound. The bleeding stopped almost miraculously. Walking over to a nearby coffin, he reached for the lid and opened it. It wasn't locked. In it lay a victim. Vermilion stained the upper body. He could quickly see where the blood, which had already begun to dry, had come from—someone had carved open the chest and cut off the head. Apparently it'd been done with prodigious force, as the head of the victim only had a thin flap of skin still linking it to the body. The next coffin was the same. As was the next, and the one after that. In no time at all, D had confirmed that every last victim was dead.

"There ain't a single footprint left here. Doesn't look like this was the work of any human," the Hunter's left hand said, its tone, not surprisingly, one of amazement. The foe they'd just faced had been underground. "It'd take twenty people to put down this many victims. But what I don't get is —"

There the voice halted. D had turned around. His ears had caught a sound that wouldn't have been perceptible to any ordinary person—the echoes of wagons approaching the entrance to the valley.

"There are five of them—cargo wagons. It's okay—they rode on past," the hoarse voice said. It sounded disappointed that nothing had happened. "Must be a late-night express hauling the essentials of life to villages along the highway. But the creaking of their wheels sounds pretty frantic. Wonder if they called on that girl's village. At any rate, the next matter of business is where those two got off to in that steam-driven car, but that doesn't interest you anymore, does it?"

"That's right," D said, his reply darker and colder than the tense blackness of night.

After the group of wagons had gone, D hit the highway.

"Steady there. If those two have gone on ahead, that group will find them. At least they're not as heartless as you."

Ignoring the mocking tone, D broke into a gallop. He quickly caught up to the group of cargo wagons. There were escorts on cyborg horses riding in front and behind them as well as to either side. Beside the drivers sat men armed with pneumatic guns.

Two of the riders broke off from the last wagon to block D's path. With the old-fashioned rifle mounted on his horse's neck trained on the new arrival all the while, one took a flashlight in his left hand and flashed it in D's face. Both men tensed at the gorgeous countenance revealed by that circle of light. At that point, even a child could've cut them down.

Recovering his bearings somewhat, the one with a beard stammered, "Wh-who the hell are you?" D's beauty was so great that the man's voice was tinged with fright. He had to wonder if this wasn't some supernatural beast—a creature of the night.

"How about you two?"

The two men looked at each other. The voice of the young man before them was so hoarse it didn't seem to suit his beauty at all.

"If you're gonna go around asking folks who they are and what they're doing, it's only common courtesy to introduce yourself first."

"We're a transport party for the Frontier Commerce and Industry Guild. It's our job to deliver orders to every village in the region," said the other man, who had a length of cloth wrapped around his head like a turban. There was the evidence to support the left hand's inference.

"I'm a Vampire Hunter," D said. Cold and exquisite as ice, his voice made the men exchange glances again.

The one with the turban said, "A Vampire Hunter? With a face like that . . . you wouldn't happen to be—"

"—D?" the other groaned in a tone that seemed to dread the very night.

"That's right," the hoarse voice replied again, but the two men didn't have enough presence of mind to find that curious. For those who lived on the Frontier, the name and deeds of the Vampire Hunter of unearthly beauty were nearly legendary.

The one with the beard lowered his light and took his right hand off his gun. "I'm Juke. I've heard of you. It's an honor to make your acquaintance."

The hesitant man in the turban followed suit, saying, "I'm Gordo."

"I'm D," the dashing young man replied.

After some bewilderment, the two men pulled back the hands they'd extended. They didn't seem to take offense at the lack of a handshake. They knew that on the Frontier, casually offering your sword hand to anyone besides an ordinary citizen was a good way to get killed.

"Didn't happen to see a steam-driven car, did you?" D inquired.

"Nope." The pair shook their heads.

"We haven't run into anybody. The area up ahead's been flooded and cut off from supplies. That's why we're in such a hurry. Maybe it took one of the byroads instead?" Juke replied.

Raising his left hand, D thanked them and said goodbye.

When the Hunter grabbed the reins again, the pair cleared the road for him. Turning back toward the wagons, Gordo shouted, "It's okay. He's a Hunter. Let him by!"

D started off at a gallop.

III

As the handsome rider in black passed the wagons, men carrying lights and weapons trained their gazes on him.

"Hold up," someone called to the Hunter just as he was about to pull away.

Halting his steed, D turned and looked. A particularly powerfully built man was leaning out off a wooden footing that encircled one of the wagons. D's eyes could pick out every single gray hair in his beard.

"I'm in charge of this transport party. Kyle's the name," the man called out with one hand cupped by the side of his mouth. "I knew the second I saw your face. You're D, aren't you? If so, I've a favor to ask of you. Could I hire you to guard us?"

D immediately turned away again.

"Hold up!" Kyle called out, his voice an octave higher. It had a ring of gravity to it. "I know you're a Vampire Hunter and all. I'd take that into consideration on hiring you. Your pay would be the same as if you were taking on Nobles."

"The area up ahead doesn't belong to the Nobility," D replied.

The mere sound of his words was enough to make the man's expression stiffen. A human could tell in a flash the voice of a dhampir—someone with the blood of the Nobility.

"With the number of people you've got and how well armed they are, you won't have any problem."

"The fact of the matter is, before we came out here, I went to a fortuneteller and had a reading done. Three times, mind you, and all of them came out real bad. Not that I necessarily believe in that stuff, but I'd like to be prepared anyway. I could really do with some serious backup."

Saying nothing, D kept his back to the man.

"You sure you won't do it?"

"Godspeed to you," the Hunter said, and then he galloped off into the night.

After he'd sped along for about an hour, dawn began to sparkle like water in the eastern sky.

"Daybreak. Human time, eh? Still, I wonder what happened to that girl," a voice from the vicinity of the Hunter's left hand could be heard to say in the fading darkness. "If we go another three miles, there's the village of Donellico, but that's pretty low lying and gets flooded by the river all the time. Being of Noble blood and all, water's not your element. Better rip through here as fast as we can or take another route."

Their conversation took place while they raced along.

D didn't slow down. Presently, the road began to dip. Chunks of rocks and stands of trees joined the scenery to either side, and an overall dense

atmosphere swept over them. Up ahead, a silvery band could be seen. The roar that'd been audible for some time was the flow of a river. And it was fairly intense, at that—it bisected the road. The spray that went up some thirty feet away was impenetrable muddy water.

"This ain't the river. It's the wake of a flood. There won't be a village left anywhere around here."

"What about the stream itself?" D asked.

"It's about a mile and a quarter from here and runs perpendicular to this flow. Given the force of this sucker, how about taking the long way around? It's not like we're in a hurry or anything."

"Can't you tell?"

"What?" the hoarse voice exclaimed. It would have knitted its eyebrows, if it'd had any.

Just then, the horse bounded right into the water and plowed straight ahead.

The voice actually sounded rather worshipful as it said, "What—did you sense something? I know sometimes your senses are even sharper than mine."

For all its grumbling, D had entered the water. In no time at all the muddy water was up to his waist. His steed lurched—the flow was so fierce even a cyborg horse had difficulty keeping its footing. Any ordinary mount and rider would've been swept away in the blink of an eye.

"Hmm," the voice said.

Pushed all the while by the overwhelming force of the water, the cyborg horse swayed its head from side to side to maintain stability and somehow began to ford the flow, partly due to the strength of the horse. However, what kept its gait strong and sure was none other than D's handling of the reins from its back. When the steed tilted to one side he would slide over to the other, and when his mount was about to give up he gave a kick to its belly to keep it moving. In no time, they'd crossed the roaring torrent to within thirty feet of the opposite shore.

From one end of the muddy stream a black shape flowed along. A coffin.

"Maybe the running water dug that out of a cemetery? But it looks like its occupant is no ordinary character. Where's the grave?"

To understand what the hoarse voice was talking about, one had only to watch the floating coffin. The muddy torrent flowed noisily past D from right to left, the water rushing downstream. Yet the black coffin was slapped by waves as it pushed its way slowly but most decidedly from left to right—moving *upstream*.

D halted his steed. Skillfully shifting his center of gravity on the back of a horse that seemed ready to lose its footing, the Hunter managed to maintain his balance as the bizarre coffin sailed right by him.

"What's the deal with that? D, don't you wanna have a look at what's inside?"

"I'm not working for anyone now."

“So you’d just let it go, then? That’s a crying shame, you know,” it chortled hoarsely. “If it were up to me, I’d make a thorough inspection of what’s inside, then drag whoever it is out into the sunlight and turn him into dust. Well, whatever. At any rate, hurry up and get us back on solid ground. Your horse can’t stand much more of this.”

Suddenly the horse began to move, and less than thirty seconds later it stood in the village. A desolate scene spread before D. The houses, earthen walls, roads, and stands of trees must’ve all been submerged for quite some time. Everything was coated with gray mud. Judging from the way both homes and boles had been knocked flat, the floodwaters had apparently surged over them quickly.

“Don’t do anything stupid. What do you think you’re up to, cutting through this village?”

Paying no mind to the hoarse complaints, D slowly rode down the village’s main street. Due to the furniture and farm implements that were scattered everywhere, his horse was hard pressed to advance. Suddenly, his vista expanded. He’d come to the center of the village—to its square.

“Well, I’ll be!” the hoarse voice exclaimed, its tone conveying rare surprise and curiosity.

What should be sitting there in the middle of the muddy and debris-strewn square but the steam-powered car.

“Sure, it’s built like a tank, but I’m still surprised it could make it through that water. Actually . . .”

It was hard enough to picture that steam engine plowing through the water. Undoubtedly the vehicle had been under someone else’s control.

“Hey, don’t just ride by. Go on over and have a peek inside.”

The voice hadn’t forced him to do it, but D rode his horse over to the steam-powered vehicle and dismounted before grabbing the handle and opening the door.

Just as the shadowy figure that erupted from the car was about to hit him, D dodged with ungodly reflexes, and the figure hit the ground hard. Letting out a cry of pain, he then passed out.

“Well, if it ain’t Quinn! Any sign of the other one?”

The car’s interior was empty. There was no trace of Rosaria.

D crouched down by Quinn’s side and put his left palm against the man’s neck. Fierce spasms rocked Quinn’s body and he awoke. Sitting up quickly, he gasped on noticing D next to him, and then twisted around to scratch at the ground with his hands and feet.

Grabbing hold of him by the collar and hoisting him to his feet, D asked in a low voice, “What happened?”

The man’s only reply was a frantically powerful struggle to move forward and an unexpectedly shrill scream.

“It’s no use. Don’t bother,” the hoarse voice told the Hunter. “Why, he’s lost his mind. Looks like he must’ve been through hell.”

“Can you help him?”

“It’ll be risky. Trying too hard to set him right might destroy his

mental functions. He's under some kind of supernatural pressure. The best thing to do is fix him little by little."

The left hand caught the still thrashing Quinn by the neck, and his expression of otherworldly terror quickly grew placid. All the strength then fled Quinn's body, which slumped to the ground.

"What happened?" D asked once again.

A flicker of intelligence spread through the man's vacant gaze. Quinn's brain had begun to sift through his memories for a response to the question. After his eyes had lit up several times, he finally said, "General Gaskell was . . ."

"General Gaskell? That monster? Come to think of it, this is pretty close to his territory. But he was supposed to have been turned to dust a long time ago. Hey! Did you really see him?" the hoarse voice asked.

"His face was outside the window . . ." Quinn replied in a ghastly tone. "He was gigantic. Had a number of other guys with him. They were all huge, too. Gaskell rapped on the glass. When I asked who it was, he gave me his name. Said it so prim and proper it made my stomach turn."

"Why'd you open up?"

"I didn't intend to at first. There were weapons, so I planned on plugging the bastard through the face or the heart. But before I could—"

There Quinn broke off.

Before it could prompt him for more details, the hoarse voice gasped—Quinn had begun to fade away. His whole outline had grown oddly vague, and the scenery behind him was becoming visible right through him.

"No! Stop, damn it! Wait!" the left hand exclaimed, its fingers finding only empty space now that Quinn was becoming one with the air. Finally just his two eyes were left in midair, and those too quickly vanished.

"You know how General Gaskell died, right?" the palm of the Hunter's left hand croaked. "Maybe he survived, or maybe this is the work of his vengeful spirit—anyhow, making people physically vanish was the best way he had of terrorizing those under his rule."

THE GENERAL'S LEGACY

CHAPTER 3

I

General Gaskell was the name of the Noble who'd ruled over the largest domain in the southern Frontier. None could compare to him in coldness and cruelty, and it was said the mere mention of his name was enough to cause even his fellow Nobility to cringe in fear.

About three centuries earlier, another member of the Greater Nobility had invited General Gaskell to a ball. Smitten with one of the lovely young women in his host's domain, he spirited her back to his own castle and struck a preemptive blow against the Nobles he knew would cause trouble, invading their lands and slaughtering not only the vampire clan and their supporters, but the entire dominion.

When there was a drop in the human serf population across the whole Frontier two centuries earlier, he'd sent artificial plasma praised as being indistinguishable from real human blood to the neighboring Nobility, poisoning them all. His intent had been to add their lands to his own fiefdom, and in order to get permission to do so, he sent word to the Capital that their deaths had been caused by a plague that singled out Noble DNA. However, the Nobility's House of Peers was understandably skeptical, dispatching a large group to conduct an inquiry and, on uncovering the general's villainy, ordering that he be destroyed by sunlight.

The resistance General Gaskell offered in light of their orders was known as "The G Revolt," and after fifty years of fighting military forces from the Capital the general was captured, exposed to sunlight in ancient ruins at the summit of Gaskell Peak—the highest point in his domain—and reduced to dust. Due to the devastation of the G Revolt, sixty percent of human serfs in his Frontier sector died and vast areas polluted by radiation and biological weapons were sealed off for all time. The Capital had even considered cordoning off that entire portion of the Frontier.

However, Gaskell's most heinous deeds involved the slaughter of his harmless subjects. While it was perfectly natural for a Noble to feed on his serfs, this is also where the varied characters of the Nobility and their views on humanity became most apparent. On feeling the thirst for blood, the majority of the Nobility would send a servant to the serfs to select a human sacrifice. Those chosen would meet with what in the medical sense was the relatively peaceful death of being drained of blood, although some were only partially drained and returned safely to villages, while other serfs became vampires and were either burned as something abhorrent or taken on as servants of the Nobility. Among the minority, there were some Nobles who negotiated with their subjects and maintained congenial relations while regularly receiving blood. In return for the humans' sacrifice, their parents and siblings were given considerable wealth or shared in the Nobility's highly advanced technology.

Gaskell was a villain who belonged to neither camp. Though he might've thirsted for blood at times, the things he did to torture his subjects seemed based solely on whim. He even went so far as to tear open the throats of fifty women and children in a single night, drinking no more than a single mouthful of blood from any of them and simply murdering the last ten. Worse yet, he gathered his clan and proposed that they have a contest to see who could drain the most residents of a given village in one night. By dawn, the entire village had perished.

In addition, the general deciphered ancient scrolls even the Greater Nobility in the Capital knew nothing about, and then went on to test the power he gained from them on his own subjects. A meteor he called from the depths of space with pinpoint accuracy had obliterated a certain village, and even now a crater thirty miles wide remained at the site. Causing earthquakes and floods or releasing new varieties of beasts and monsters was easy enough for him. On one occasion he moved an entire mountain to crush a village of rebellious subjects, and after using preservation equipment on the corpses of those he'd tortured and killed, he piled them into a pyramid that was said to have grown ten thousand feet high over the course of five centuries.

However, what Gaskell used so well to keep the forces from the Capital at an overwhelming disadvantage for fifty years of fighting was the ability to make matter disappear. Through whatever means, he was able to make a given creature or object vanish without any kind of energy conversion at all. Thousands at a time vanished from the army of emotionless soldiers bearing down on the general's stronghold, with wide holes quickly opening in the ranks as if something had taken a bite out of the spot. That was how an account from a soldier at the front described it.

As might be expected, this apparently consumed a vast amount of power, and frequent "erasures" were impossible. Also, although many of Gaskell's weapons were left inoperable and his forces were forced to surrender to the invaders, the Capital demanded nothing short of the general's capture. It was due to this that the battle dragged on for fifty long years. The Capital's aim was to make the ancient treasures General Gaskell possessed their own, at least according to common and not-so-furtively whispered rumors. The general was caught and tortured in ways that frightened even the bloodstained Nobility, but he vanished into mist on that mountaintop without ever telling them anything. What D and his left hand had just witnessed was indisputably General Gaskell's form of erasure.

"So, maybe the general survived, or maybe this is the work of someone who picked up where he left off—whatever the case, someone definitely erased that guy. But what would they want with those two?"

"Is this the general's domain?" D inquired.

"No, the closest part of it is a good twenty miles to the north. Even then, thanks to the unbridled use of nuclear and mystical weapons back in the G Revolt, it's a wasteland not fit for even an ant to live in."

“Was erasure the only trick the general had?” D said, his question echoing in the blackness.

Silence descended. His left hand showed signs of surprise.

“So far as I can remember, according to computer records and data in the scientific facilities in the general’s castle, plus official findings from the yearlong investigation scientists from the Capital ran after the castle was taken. But according to one theory in a tome on extremely ancient practices the general had, in addition to this erasure, there was also a fragmented description of recovery. And it’s said that the general had for the most part succeeded in deciphering it.”

Sucking in a mighty breath, the hoarse voice immediately continued, “Hmm—maybe what we just saw was him still experimenting?”

Then the left hand took the tone of a celebrated detective who’d just solved a riddle. “If that’s the case, the key that unlocked the door to that mystery would be in the ruins of the general’s castle, eh? Interesting. Should we go have a look?”

“This has nothing to do with me,” D said, getting back on his horse. As he stared straight ahead, his expression didn’t betray so much as a hint of concern for the man and woman who’d briefly accompanied him.

“Oh dear,” the hoarse voice declared with calculated surprise.

It was unclear if D had already noticed the silvery flow silently creeping closer from all sides. Water.

“It’s rising, is it? The second you got here, I—oh!”

The hoarse voice couldn’t help but gasp. The next thing it knew, the encroaching water had risen to the cyborg horse’s belly.

D didn’t move. To his right, there was the pop of bursting bubbles.

Thirty feet away.

One after another the little bubbles popped. And they were slowly getting closer.

Thirty feet . . . Twenty-five . . . Twenty . . .

When they came within fifteen feet, D turned his eyes toward them. The trail of bubbles stopped moving. A few seconds later one huge bubble burst and, following after it, a human the same color as the water emerged from the waist up. It was a child. Dripping with muddy rivulets, the face was that of someone perhaps twelve or thirteen. The oddly distended abdomen and swollen limbs made it clear that this was a drowning victim. Though the boy kept the lightless eyes of the dead trained on D, his lips quickly twisted into a strange shape, and then he sank again into the water with the same speed as he’d first appeared.

“He smiled at you!” the hoarse voice remarked with amusement. “Probably a kid from the village. You should hurry up and put him out of his misery.”

Before the voice had finished speaking, the cyborg horse was jerked underwater. As D narrowly managed to leap into the air, below him the body of his steed was crushed as if it were a bubble being sucked into a tiny hole. In no time at all, it’d been drawn beneath the surface.

Accompanied by a pillar of water, horrible chunks of the mount shot into the air just as the tips of D's toes landed on the edge of a farmhouse roof.

Perhaps having somehow seen the dismembered limbs and head that'd fallen into the water, the hand commented in a hoarse voice, "Every last piece was all twisted up. Looks like it was pulled into one hell of a whirlpool." Despite the ghastly scene it'd just witnessed, it still hadn't lost the ring of amusement to its voice.

The cyborg horse's skeleton was made of a high-polymer steel that could bear up to fifty tons. What kind of force did it take to warp and tear apart something like that in under a second?

On the rooftop, D bent his knees easily for another leap. And at exactly that moment his footing gave way. In the blink of an eye, dozens of streaks of white shot up from below to riddle the roof of the house—or rather, the entire structure. With the hem of his coat billowing out, D flew like a supernatural bird. Fearsome and beautiful was the only way to describe the sight of him, and probably no one would've noticed that his form was only slightly off.

A round face had appeared from the water. The face of the drowned boy. His thin and rotting lips pursed, and then a streak of white shot at where D hung in midair.

Ordinarily the Hunter's blade would've flashed out to deflect the attack in a manner that exceeded the limits of human mobility yet was at the same time effortless. However, the slightest twist in his body meant that his hand was just a little too slow as it reached for his sword, and before he could touch the weapon, the streak of white stabbed through D from the left side of his stomach to the base of his right arm.

The village square was about thirty feet wide, and D headed toward the enormous tree that stood at its center. The instant he landed on one of its great outstretched limbs, he was assailed by a second attack. Silvery light flashed out, and the streak broke into thousands of drops of water that faded like a thin mist.

"Water?" the hoarse voice remarked, but before it could finish, D staggered and slumped back against the tree trunk.

Three times streaks shot at him from the water, easily ripping through the ironlike bark of the tree or else sailing off into space. They returned to their original state a mile or two up, scattering in midair and probably falling again as raindrops.

Water—that's precisely what it was. Thanks to the powerful suction power the bloated corpse of the drowned boy had been given, he could create tiny whirlpools that tore apart whatever they pulled in, and by his own expiration he could discharge liquids at supersonic speeds, turning them into a spear that could penetrate a steel plate. Further aided by the ability to move with the swiftness of a fish, he launched more liquid spears in rapid succession from underwater at various locations and different angles all around the massive tree, piercing and shredding the ten-foot-diameter trunk as if it were tissue paper.

“There was something about this in the records in the Capital, you remember?” the hoarse voice said. “A passage in *A Catalog of General Gaskell’s Arsenal*—the one about submarine attackers that make use of the dead. Turning dead people into weapons is a hell of a thing to do.”

Bringing his left hand up to his face, D whispered something to it.

“Huh?” the hoarse voice said with surprise. Ripples ran across the center of the palm, and what should rise to the surface but a human face complete with eyes, a nose, and a mouth. “I’m not saying I can’t do it or anything, but that’d take a hell of a lot more energy than usual. You won’t have enough left for more than one swing of your sword. Try to think of—”

The rest was muffled and incomprehensible.

Bending over, D had thrust his left hand into the muddy water that’d risen to just below the great branch, then quickly pulled it out again.

The face in the palm of his hand let a great belch escape.

As if that were the signal, two streaks shot out of the water, piercing D at an angle.

II

With thick streams of blood pouring from both sides of his abdomen, D stood up and pointed his left hand at the surface of the water. The countenanced carbuncle had already risen in his palm, and it threw its mouth open wide.

It was at just that moment that a tiny fireball fell from above D’s head. On making contact with the massive tree, the flames spread out like oil thrown onto water, swiftly covering the trunk and branches. The part of it that struck the water set off an immense shower of sparks that rode the wind back toward D.

“What the hell was that?” the left hand exclaimed.

D was already looking up again. Apart from where the light of dawn was bleaching the eastern sky, the heavens for the most part allowed themselves to be ruled by darkness. D’s eyes caught a blurry object—indiscernible as bird or human—flying gracefully through that black space. Flying first toward the east, it then turned around and sailed over D’s head before hurling down a fireball. The surface of the water was burning. Even farmhouses and barns that barely protruded from the water were engulfed in flames, which spiraled up into the heavens like dragons. Burning branches rained down on D from above, while below him the fiery water grew closer.

About fifteen feet away, something black sprang from the depths, limned a small arc, and then dropped into the water again. It was the boy.

“Finally decided to show himself, did he? But why? It’s not like he needs to breathe. Come to mention it, it seemed like he was prattling on about something. Did you hear it?”

D said nothing as he gazed at the wildly blazing surface of the water. Both his bloodstained lower body and his paraffin-pale brow were the color

of flames.

"Here it comes—this time from both sides!" his left hand warned him.

The aerial shape turned once again, and the submarine form moved into position below D. Would the gravely wounded Hunter have enough strength left to get through this?

The watery spear slashed through the air. When D's blade deflected it, the world grew pale blue, for the left hand he'd extended had disgorged flames. Pale blue in color, they must've had incredible energy, because the instant they touched the water it evaporated, leaving a gap a good thirty feet deep. A split second before that, the svelte figure had leapt like a little river fish.

As the boy seemed to throw himself back into the water, D's sword raced toward him. The tip of his blade narrowly missed the child, but then it stretched further. The instant the arcs of the blade and the boy met, there was the thud of meat being cleaved and a faint cry of pain rang out. Shortly after that, two splashes went up—one large, the other small. D's sword had separated the head of the dead boy from his torso. In midair the boy's eyes had sought his foe, though they held no profound emotion regarding the death he'd just suffered.

No ball of fire fell. D had witnessed the shadowy form sailing away toward the river, and a thin line ran through its body at an angle. What had kept the thing in the sky from attacking at the same time as the thing underwater was one of dozens of arrows that'd come flying out of nowhere.

"It's the transport party," the hoarse voice said. "From the angle of that arrow, they must be near the river. Can't say whether they were trying to save you or not. Oh, damn—that freak's gone off to have its revenge!"

Before D could decide whether or not to leave the burning tree, the distant darkness was tinged with red and a mixture of gunshots and shouts. But the shouts soon became screams.

"The water's receding."

Most likely the latest death of the reanimated boy had broken the spell he held over the floodwaters. As the muddy water began to draw back with stunning coldness, the ground it left exposed was caked with mud.

The Hunter had no horse. Getting down from the tree, D began to sprint across the mud. Beneath the paling sky, gigantic flames blazed as if begrudging the night. On the other side of the muddy torrent lay a road. It was definitely the transport party.

Just as he was about to launch himself into the swiftly moving water without hesitation, D fell to one knee. The flame attack his left hand had launched had used nearly all the power in his body. Making matters worse, he was badly wounded. It was nearly a miracle that he'd been able to make the ungodly slash that'd dispatched the dead boy.

"Wait! Get us some dirt now," his left hand clamored, but D merely shook his head as he got back on his feet.

"What've we got here?" the hoarse voice groaned. "Earlier it was just one—now we've got a regular parade."

D didn't argue.

Out in the relentless muddy torrent, coffins came along haughtily, fighting the flow. Not just one. Ten or twenty—no, fifty or a hundred. Most were rough wooden affairs nailed together, but among them were some intricately carved coffins painted black or white. All of them were pushing their way against the flow of nature, knifing through the water, surging further upstream. Although the left hand had called it a parade, this procession of coffins moved not to the music of a march but rather to a funeral dirge.

"What fun! This is a real treat. Hey, D! Grab one of 'em and drag it ashore. We've gotta see what's inside."

"Later," D said as he threw himself into the flow.

With a speed that was incredible for a person with essentially no strength remaining, he swam toward the opposite bank. Skillfully, he slipped between the coffins. Even after he'd dashed up the bank and down the road, the procession of creepy resting places of the dead remained unabated in the light of dawn. If what slumbered in them were their rightful occupants, what did the one summoning them upstream want, and what purpose would they serve?

The sky grew lighter, but the muddy flow showed no signs of tapering off.

On reaching the highway, D was greeted by a burning road and the wagons from earlier. At a glance, it was clear they'd come under attack from fireballs from that mysterious flying object. Though several apparent survivors were there, all they could do was stand by, powerless. None of them could pull the golden fangs or platinum bones from the great immolated beast.

On spotting D, the trio on horseback came riding over.

"D—is that you?"

"You're a sight for sore eyes—or you would've been, but you're a little too late."

The bearded Juke and turbaned Gordo were tinged not by the present flames but by a different kind of hellfire.

Pointing to a third man, a lanky individual, Gordo said, "This here's Sergei. He may look thin as a rail, but the truth is he's the toughest man among us."

The lanky man mumbled a few words that might've been a greeting if they'd escaped his mouth unchewed and bowed his head slightly.

"All told, the only survivors were the three of us who were on point."

"No," Sergei countered in a voice that was like the whine of a mosquito. "There was the captain, too."

The captain was the same man who'd tried to hire D to guard the transport party. Gordo and Juke both bared their teeth, but then, realizing it was too late, they looked at each other.

"The thing that burned the wagons—it knew that the captain was the

one who'd shot him, you see," Juke said as he scratched at his beard. Still looking down, he continued, "He did that because he knew the village was right around here. He couldn't just stand by and do nothing about a monster dropping fireballs. But in the end, that proved his downfall. Well, I suppose you could say he brought it on himself—"

"That's not true!" Like grinding gears, the voice was low and deep, but it had enough force to it to make Juke's eyes bulge. "The captain was always right. And he was right this time, too. It was that flying freak that was in the wrong."

"Yes—right you are," Gordo said, giving the man a clap on his scrawny back to cheer him up.

"C'mon, Juke—you take that back!" Sergei growled like a beast.

Nodding, the bearded one said, "Fine. The captain was right. He always was."

"Thanks. That's just how it was."

To Sergei's rear there was a hard clang. On his back was a crossed pair of swords, curved like D's but a little longer.

The flames wavered.

"They're coming down!" Juke said, spurring his mount forward.

And as the four of them moved away, the transport wagons that'd been turned into bonfires made a great crash as they collapsed to the ground and sent debris flying in all directions.

As he fanned away the persistent sparks, Gordo looked down at D and said, "When that thing first hit us, we cut loose a couple of our spare horses. If you wait here, they should be back before long. Take one of 'em and ride off."

D asked, "What'll you do now?"

"We'll keep at our job. We're transporters."

"My sentiments exactly," Juke said, raising his right hand, and Sergei nodded his gaunt face.

"You don't have any goods," D remarked.

"Sure we do!" Juke said, finally showing a smile. The bearded man was an optimist to the core. "Our job usually consists of carrying cargo around in those wagons, but we cover the whole Frontier. A wagon gets emptied pretty fast, and you also have to take into account bandits, monsters, and natural disasters—just like what we've had here. In this line of work, you can't just shrug your shoulders when you lose the whole works in an accident. But you see, wherever the trains run, merchandise gets sent to a number of secure stations, and we've got a system where we can go there and pick up more when our stock runs low. That's why we're always fully loaded."

"The station is three miles north of here. A place called Jalha. That's where we're going. Get ourselves a wagon, some horses, and some guys, and we'll be fine. Can't say whether we'll make it all the way to the end of our run, but we can't very well walk away from the job. Every one of those villages is on pins and needles waiting for those goods," Gordo said, his words imbued with strength.

To supply-strapped Frontier villages, their visits were like manna from heaven.

"Here come the horses," Sergei said meekly.

Though the fires still burned on the road, they'd died down greatly by the time several horses came down the highway.

"Take whichever one you like. A present from us to the greatest Hunter on the Frontier."

D took the reins of one of the animals that'd congregated, and then reached into one of his coat's inner pockets. From him a golden gleam flew in an exquisite arc, and was then swallowed by Juke's fist.

Quickly opening his fingers for a peek at his catch, the bearded man remarked with admiration, "A golden dracze? This one coin's worth fifteen normal gold pieces! Yeah, you first-class Hunters sure have style."

And squinting with delight, he threw the coin back to D.

"Please, don't take this the wrong way. I just can't take money from someone I respect so much."

"Respect?"

Though that groan of amazement echoed from the left hand D had wrapped around the reins, it vanished when he squeezed it into a fist.

"Anybody who lives on the Frontier has heard about you, either a little or a lot. Don't know how much of it is true, but I believe what I've heard. Having seen the source of all those rumors up close, I see that I wasn't wrong. You're the real deal. Take the horse, as a favor to me."

"Well then, we're off—Godspeed to you," Gordo said, extending one hand before he realized what he was doing and pulled it back again.

"We've gotta get to the station and make arrangements to have our colleagues buried. Not that we'll have time to hang around for the funerals. So long. It was a pleasure meeting you!" Juke said, waving one hand and wheeling his horse around.

As the Hunter watched the shadowy forms of mounts and riders go, a hoarse voice was heard to say, "What can the three of them do?"

They were more than halfway to the village of Jalha before Juke finally broke the silence, saying, "Hope we can get enough guys."

"We won't and you know it. No point mulling it over now," Gordo said with disgust.

"Then we'll have to pay them triple—no, that won't work either. Worst come to worst, it might just be the three of us."

"It's a shame."

Those words, which seemed to slip unconsciously from Sergei, made

the other two nod. No one had to ask what was a shame.

"With just one Hunter like that along, I could do this run alone," Juke muttered.

Gordo grinned at that. "Don't be stupid. Hell, we've got *you*, don't we?"

"That we do!"

The responses from Sergei's bearded and turbaned compatriots earned them glaring looks, but all three men soon let their shoulders slump.

Knowing it was no use, Juke still muttered, "If only D were here."

"You called?"

Without their realizing it, another rider had pulled up alongside them. The voice that they heard was his. Turning, Juke and the other two stared in amazement at the young man of unearthly beauty. In the predawn gloom, he had a heavenly glow.

"But you—what are you doing here?" Juke finally managed to say.

"Since you wouldn't take payment for the horse, I have no choice but to work it off," D said.

"You mean to say you'll go with us?" Gordo asked in a dazed tone. He simply couldn't believe it. As residents of the Frontier, they knew that the most famous Hunters always remained on their own.

"For the value of a horse—that'd be until we're across this district," Juke told the Hunter, robotically extending his right hand. He only realized how pointless the action might've been after a black-gloved hand gripped it firmly in return.

"My pleasure," D said.

III

More than a dozen guards rode in the freight train. All were armed with the very latest weapons and on full alert for bandit mobs. The railroad itself was exclusively for shipping and didn't carry any passengers. Since lines were few and far between and attacks by bandits or monsters were frequent, no one would ride them anyway.

At a spot thirty minutes from Jalha Station a freight man sporting a transport-company badge brought the men some coffee. Turning a stern look on him, one of the guards said, "Take a drink of it."

Well aware that it was a common ploy for bandits to bribe someone, the freight man shrugged his shoulders and poured the steaming black liquid into a cup.

"Pour a little into each cup. Then take a sip out of each of 'em."

Giving a blow on his whistle, the freight man said, "When I get to be boss, I'd be pleased to have you boys working my security exclusively."

He then set the pot down and went on his way.

On contact with air the contents of the coffeepot turned into a gaseous carnivore, but it took another five minutes for it to spill from the mouth of the container. Meanwhile, the colleagues the freight man had signaled had

killed the other employees and ordered the engineer—who was also party to this—to stop the train. After that, it would simply be a matter of waiting for the mob of bandits to arrive, collecting a handsome reward, and then making themselves scarce.

They sprayed a gas through the freight-car door that would become highly toxic when it mixed with the creature's chemical makeup, then waited thirty seconds before going inside. There was nothing in the hold except cargo. The gaseous creature had assimilated the guards so that no trace of them remained, and it in turn had been reduced to the components of air.

Three men reached for the door to the car and tried to open it. There was still a little time before the bandits were due to come, and they couldn't resist the urge to see what was inside. When the pale light of dawn speared in through the thread-thin opening, they stopped what they were doing.

"Wait a minute," someone had said to them.

All three of them knew they weren't carrying anything but cargo. And if some lousy hobo had been sneaking a ride, the gas creature wouldn't have missed him.

"It's time to get up, but it's still a tad bright out. Would you be so good as to close that?"

Before the last remark had finished, the trio finally managed to pinpoint where it came from. In front of a mountain of what seemed to be wooden crates of food there lay a single wooden box that was longer and slimmer. On closer inspection it differed from the other containers in that it didn't have a single nail in it and the boards seemed to have been finished. That's where the voice originated.

The three men drew the revolvers holstered on their hips. The freight man who'd released the gaseous creature had buckshot rounds in his weapon. Each of the thirty rounds would spread to three feet in diameter at a distance of thirty feet, and the instant the buckshot entered the target's body it would mushroom out, causing horrendous damage.

"Hey!" called out a man in thick glasses who was cocking a long-barreled pistol. "That's—well, you know—"

"Yeah. It got put on at Vigonell Station—supposed to be experimental soil."

"Soil—and a wooden box?" a third man, wearing a leather vest, said in a dazed tone. "The contents must've been checked over, right?"

"They sure were," the freight man said, nodding his head. Wooden boxes and soil were hallmarks of the Nobility.

The men drove sharp iron stakes into the soil and exposed it to sunlight, but nothing seemed to be hidden in it. However, the voice was definitely coming from the box.

"I'm gonna open the door," the freight man muttered. "Once the place is flooded with light, blast the box."

"Okay."

"You got it."

The others nodded their agreement as they spoke, but the barrels of their guns shook wildly. Only one thing cheered them—it was already dawn.

Grabbing the door, the freight man threw it open with all his might. Watery light flooded the car. Reports and sparks tinged the sunlight. Splinters flew as bullets gouged holes. Large chunks of wood went flying and ash gray soil sailed into the air—that was the work of the freight man's buckshot. The trio quickly emptied their weapons. Forgetting to reload, they focused their bloodshot eyes on the ravaged wooden box. Soil spilled from holes large and small to make little mounds on the floor.

"We killed it, don't you think?" the man in thick glasses asked in a terrified tone.

Against a Noble, buckshot meant nothing. Sunlight was all they could count on.

"Yep," the man in the leather vest said with a nod, but he turned a desperate look to the freight man. He was the one who'd dragged the two of them into this.

"Don't worry, we put it down. Besides, if it was a Noble, it couldn't live here in the light of the sun, could it? I'll prove it to you now."

Having set all this in motion, he couldn't help but follow through. With the empty shotgun in one hand, the freight man headed for the wooden box. Leaning over one of the great holes his own buckshot had created, he used one hand to push the dirt aside.

"See? There's no one—"

He'd intended to say *inside*. But that couldn't be right. The voice had come from within.

He gazed at the surface of the soil patiently.

This continued for so long that the man in the thick glasses asked, "Something the matter?"

There was no reply.

The man in the leather vest stepped forward. Apparently he was bolder than his bespectacled colleague.

"Hey!" he said, clapping a hand on the freight man's shoulder.

Suddenly, the freight man bent over more sharply and peered into the box.

A second later the same man tumbled backward, falling on a part of the floor where the sunlight puddled. Half his throat was torn open.

From this ghastly cadaver the other two shifted their gaze to the box. Moving naturally up until this point, the man in the leather vest and the one in glasses groaned as if burned by the sunlight and froze in their tracks. From a split in the box—and from the gray soil within it—jutted the pale hand of a corpse. It was covered in blood up to the wrist. As they watched, the hand grew hazy—as if it were shrouded in some kind of steam.

"Alas, I've forgotten to put on my lotion. That's going to sting," the voice said in an agitated manner. "Well, I suppose I shall last long enough

to dispose of the last two cretins. Besides which, my long slumber has left me famished. Now that I've been detained here, I suppose someone will be coming along to carry off the cargo."

The bloodstained hand went back into the soil. There was a sound. The man in the glasses and his friend in the leather vest felt their blood freeze. A Noble who didn't mind being exposed to sunlight—now that was a shock. And he was making the sound—a slurping, sucking noise. Cleaning the freight man's blood from his fingers.

Behind the paralyzed pair, the door slammed shut. Darkness blanketed everything. It was as if a pitch-black banquet was beginning in the air of dawn.

THE GENERAL'S INVITEE

CHAPTER 4

I

The train arrived at Jalha Station thirty minutes behind schedule. It was so rare for one to be that close to arriving on time that the stationmaster and his employees exchanged glances.

D rode around back to the receiving bay with Gordo, Juke, and Sergei, and he remained mounted, as if to cover the other three after they got down off their horses. Out here on the Frontier, they couldn't relax simply because the train had arrived safely. The names of all the stations that'd been hit by bandits just as a train arrived and then burned to the ground would make a list a mile long. Showing his work papers to a railway worker, Juke got permission to make the pickup.

When they went through the receiving bay and out onto the platform, there was a figure in vermilion walking from the far end of the train. From his top hat to the cape hanging down to his knees, his jacket to his bow tie, the man was clad entirely in one shade of red. Though his face was youthful, a neat beard graced him from the nose down, and his right hand held a blue walking stick with a golden handle. Out in the sunlight, his face and hands glistened as if they were coated with some kind of cream. Though the dapper young man had his left thumb in his mouth and sucked it as he went along, when he passed by the trio he pulled his hand away from his mouth, touched it to the brim of his hat, and bowed his head slightly. The trio ignored him—they took him for some sort of snob. This was due in part to their being so busy getting a wagon and making other arrangements after their arrival in town that they hadn't had time to sleep.

Not seeming to take any offense, the man went back to sucking his thumb, walking another fifteen feet or so before halting. To his left was the receiving bay. D was there. The man in the top hat made an easy turn in D's direction. Their eyes met.

Somewhere, a cry of surprise rang out. A shadow had suddenly passed across the sun.

D's hair billowed. The hem of the vermilion cape swirled wildly. It was the wind.

There was a flash of light in the ashen sky.

Juke, Gordo, and Sergei all noticed. So did the station workers. Even with the wind and thunder and lightning, they knew that this was a battle. D was up on his horse, the man in the top hat down on the ground—and in the space between the two of them, invisible sparks flew.

"Where'd you come from?" D asked, as if he were an interrogator grilling a suspect for a confession.

Smiling thinly, the man in the top hat replied, "From quite some distance." He said it as if he were an honest defendant incredulous of the charges against him.

"Where are you going?"

"Quite some distance more."

"If it's General Gaskell's domain, that certainly is quite some distance."

"You're well informed," the man in the top hat said, his smile deepening.

Not taking his eyes off him, D said, "That freight car stinks of blood. As does your left hand. Are you an invitee of the general?"

Astonishment spread across the face of the man in the top hat. Though he tried to hide it, he quickly gave up.

"When I received the invitation, I wondered what kind of incredible individuals I might encounter, but this is more than I ever expected. If you know the legend of the invitees, you must be—D?"

"I'm D."

The light in the sky bleached D's visage white. A rumble of rapture went up—it had escaped from the transport-party trio and the station staff. That instant of beauty had snatched their very souls away . . . as it had another's. He looked up at D vacantly.

"In return, allow me to introduce myself. I am Baron Schuma."

"I've heard of you," D said, his words slammed by thunder.

"As you may know, I am not the only invitee. I'm sure at some point you shall be seeing all of us. May I pass?"

"The road belongs to the station, not me."

"In that case—" Baron Schuma turned forward again and was about to walk off to the ticket gate. Every fiber of his being was focused toward his intent—but then he halted.

A flash adorned the pair with pale blue. Lightning.

The tip of the baron's cane rose smoothly. D didn't move. Everyone present was convinced that this unexpected battle would surely end with one of them dead.

At that moment, the ring of iron-shod hooves was overlaid with the sound of wagon wheels out at the entrance to the station, which gave way to screams of urgency that soon halted. Amidst the wind and lightning, a clear voice, but one that didn't seem to belong to any warm-blooded human, said, "Has Baron Schuma arrived? The administrator of the southern Frontier's third sector, General Gaskell, has sent a carriage for him."

It was several seconds before the dire meaning of these words dawned on the station staff. Their souls had been imprisoned since D and Baron Schuma squared off.

"Dear me!" the baron exclaimed, the tension draining from his body. The smile never leaving his face, he thrust his walking stick in D's direction. "It would appear my ride is here. That will be all for today—"

And then his smile vanished.

There was no change in D. The whole world might suddenly alter, but this gorgeous young man would never stop until the foe before him was destroyed. The battle continued.

The baron was about to raise his stick when a black cloud of indignant

despair covered his face. In the next few seconds, matters would probably be settled between the pair one way or another.

However, heaven didn't allow that to pass. With a series of strange shouts, humans came down from the sky. They were men with balloons strapped to their bodies, the gas-filled bags appearing to be the internal organs of some creature. There was no need to see their vicious scowls. One look at their clothes and the way they were armed with spears and swords made it clear they were a mob of bandits. There were tiny propellers attached to the front and back of their bodies, which apparently allowed them to control their heading.

Outlaw attacks from above like this weren't uncommon at Frontier train stations, and ordinarily an eye was kept on the skies. Security was especially tight when a freight train loaded with lots of cargo pulled in. However, today of all days the people's attention was entirely focused on the unusual pair's face-off. The moment the guy manning the watchtower on the roof of the station building swung around the kind of heavy machine gun rarely found in poor Frontier villages, he was fatally stabbed by a bandit who pounced on him. Aided by another man who'd descended with him, the killer attached a balloon to the entire gun and its store of ammo, and then filled it with an incredibly buoyant gas from a cylinder. The weapon that floated up was an important part of their spoils, and it would be carried off to where the bandits' cargo wagons waited in the distant mountains.

One after another grenades rained from the hands of the men in midair, blowing the station and its helpless staff in all directions.

"Get in the freight car!" the stationmaster cried. Those goods were what their foes were after. There was no way they'd blow the car carrying them to kingdom come.

The station staff also started to fight back, managing to shoot down a number of the outlaws with bows and pneumatic rifles, but caught unaware and severely outnumbered, they had no choice but to take cover in the station building.

At the same moment, the men who'd landed on the roof of the train attached a transport balloon with truly amazing speed, and the train floated up into the air like a toy.

From above D and the baron, the foes descended, raining arrows all the while. What happened next could only be described as bizarre. On landing, the bandits all slumped right to the ground. And what should be jutting from their chests and abdomens but the iron arrows they had launched at D only seconds earlier. Motionless in the saddle, he'd had the reins in his left hand while his right had plucked the deadly missiles and hurled them back at the attackers with a mere flick of his wrist.

"I should've expected as much," the baron said with a grin. "They're like infants trying to fight a grown man. I wonder how I'll fare?"

From either side of the platform, men armed with swords and staffs barreled toward the Nobleman. Scowling viciously and churning with a

thirst for blood, the men came to a dead stop about fifteen feet away. The color instantly drained from their horrified faces, and cold sweat poured from them. Their numbers were bolstered then by three men who leapt down off the freight car—but that trio was also paralyzed.

"What's wrong? Come now," the baron called out.

Still the villains wouldn't move—or rather, they couldn't move. They were stopped cold, as if taking even a single step would mean instant death.

Raising his walking stick, the baron pointed it at the pair on the right. "Come," he said.

And with that, the ones he'd indicated tottered forward as if they were marionettes or had been mesmerized. After they'd taken a few steps, the baron's stick was thrust forward and immediately pulled back again three times. It moved less than four inches. Squawking like chickens, the men tumbled backward, clutching their throats. It was only after they'd landed on their backs that bright blood gushed out from between their fingers. The wounds were indeed at the same level the baron had moved his walking stick. However, being more than ten feet away at the time, it didn't appear there was any way it could've possibly come in contact with them.

The stick shifted to the Nobleman's left hand—and pointed at the men to his right.

"Come to me," the baron said, his voice like some suggestion they simply couldn't resist. That pair also staggered forward.

One of them—a man with a staff—barely managed to plant his feet, and with a savage cry he swung the weapon. Though the staff was about six feet long, at least that much distance remained between him and the baron. A split second later, a black chain flew from the end of the staff and wrapped around the baron's walking stick. Like a man possessed, the outlaw tugged with all his might. Not only was he skilled with the staff and chain, but he was also a giant of a man. And though he seemed to be three times the size of an ordinary person, his incredible muscles were so well defined that he actually looked slim for his size.

Pulled tight, there was no slack in the chain, but the baron didn't budge an inch. Suddenly, he waved his cane. What resulted was a phenomenon that was physically impossible. While the two of them remained exactly where they were, a series of waves raced down that once-taut chain, driving the staff against the man's wrists. His wrists broke, along with his staff.

It was shortly after that that the man let out a scream. Once the extended walking stick waved four inches from side to side, fresh blood spilled from his throat and the man collapsed on the spot, still clutching his new mouth.

Only one remained. He was motionless, as if entranced, but the baron called to him, "Come to me."

The spell was broken. The man made a break for the railroad tracks, but the train had already floated up into the air. As he ran directly under it,

he fiddled with the gas cylinder and propeller on his belt.

The baron said, “Observe.” Whether that was addressed to D or a concession to his own Noble vanity was unclear.

His cane limned a vicious arc. All the ropes on the balloon lifting the train were severed, while blood shot from the men who’d held them.

The fleeing man had just left the ground. The falling train struck him in midair, and the instant his feet were pressed back down to the ground, he was transformed into a titan bearing the weight of the world. His screams were effaced by the crash of the train and ground coming together.

Another sound rang out. Off to D’s left, someone in midair had lobbed a grenade. On the back of his spinning horse, D raised his left hand to fend off the blistering-hot shrapnel flying toward him, and then swept out with his right hand. The rough wooden needle that went sailing through the air pierced the man through the windpipe as he prepared to hurl a second explosive, and both he and his grenade blew apart in midair. Needles jabbed through three more in rapid succession, at which point the thieves began to flee, spewing invectives all the while.

As D remained motionless on the platform, Juke and his two companions raced over to him. Apparently they’d offered what resistance they could, as their clothes were torn and they were filthy with blood, sand, and gunpowder residue.

“We saw what happened, and it was incredible! You never even got down off your horse in that crazy skirmish, and you put down around ten of them in the blink of an eye.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? Hey!”

Ignoring their cries of joy and astonishment, D had turned his gaze to the end of the platform.

Just as he was about to slip through the turnstiles and out of the station, Baron Schuma halted and turned in the Hunter’s direction, bringing one hand to the rim of his hat and giving an easy bow before disappearing.

“D, was that character a Noble?” Juke asked, his expression stark white.

“Yes.”

“Impossible! He was walking around in broad daylight,” Gordo said. His previously yellowed turban was now stained with blood.

“It happens occasionally.”

“A Noble who can move by day—he’s unstoppable,” Sergei said in a subdued manner.

“He said he’d been summoned by General Gaskell, didn’t he? What’s that supposed to mean? For a long, long time now the general’s been . . .” Gordo muttered, not seeming to want to say the rest.

Juke elbowed him, saying, “We’re talking about the Nobility here. He must’ve come back to life. Time means nothing to them.”

“I guess not—oh, the carriage has taken off! Does that little weasel think he’s off to see General Gaskell?”

“What’s it matter? It’s got nothing to do with our route. That’s a

relief," Juke said, letting out a long sigh.

At this point the station staff came over and asked them to inspect the cargo of the smashed freight car.

"This'll take all day. Sorry, D, but we'll have to ask you to stick around," Juke said apologetically.

II

Fortunately, out of the three freight cars, the one that was left had more cargo in it than the other two combined. Having hired people to help load their wagon, it was well past noon when they finally left the village.

"Next stop is the village of Jelkin, isn't it? We won't make it there before sundown," Juke said from the driver's seat with displeasure. "At any rate, we'd best hurry."

The eyes these words lit a fire in were not Gordo's but rather those of Sergei, who sat beside him in the front seat. The normally taciturn man took an uncharacteristic glance at the sky and said, "We've got three hours till sunset. It'll take another three hours after that to reach the village. How about we camp out and get there first thing in the morning? That'd only put us two days behind the date in our agreement."

"You idiot! Don't you know how anxiously those villagers are waiting for this stuff? If the medicine we're bringing gets there even an hour late it could mean somebody's baby dies from a poison scarab bite. I hear any more crap like that out of you and I'll knock you flat."

At the sight of Juke with veins popping out of his forehead, Sergei quickly fell silent. He didn't seem at all the sort of man who lived out on the Frontier.

Having heard their exchange from the top of the wagon, the grinning Gordo walked to the back, climbed down to the rear deck, and called back to D, who was guarding their rear, "That Sergei's an odd bird. He's not a bad person, and he does a good job. It's just that he seems to lack a certain something for living on the Frontier. Everything he says is so damned rational. Guess maybe he's what you'd call an intellectual. Whoa! We're picking up speed. Looks like ol' Juke is hell bent on reaching Jelkin before the day is out."

Presently their surroundings grew more desolate. They were on a road through plains without a speck of green to them. In scattered places there were huge holes perhaps a hundred yards across, and strange rocks were piled in pyramids in what might even be described as some kind of bizarre art installation. As the white smoke that rose in so many places was a poisonous gas, the area was littered with the bones of countless birds and beasts.

"The wind's taken a bad turn. It's blowing right toward us," Gordo yelled down to the driver's seat, having returned to the roof of the wagon.

"No problem. There's not all that much of it. If you were to breathe some in, it wouldn't take more than a few months off your life," Juke replied.

"I suppose you've got a point there."

The two of them then heard a masculine but captivating voice say, "Not today."

Nearly falling under its spell, the pair—or actually, all three men—quickly scanned either side of the road. Normally the white smoke merely drifted weakly across the ground, but suddenly it was coming toward them, churning and white, so heavy it hid the color of the earth beneath it. The distant forests and mountains were also hidden by white smoke, leaving only their silhouettes—and soon even those slipped from sight.

"What the hell is all this?" Gordo said, eyes bulging in their sockets.

Juke shouted to him and to Sergei, "Shut your eyes and hold your breath. We'll be through this in a minute."

The only thing unaffected by the gas attack would be the cyborg

horses.

"Hyah!" Juke shouted to his team, cracking the reins to make the horses pick up speed. Though the gas wasn't advancing at a great speed, the cargo wagon was also at a disadvantage. It was heavy.

"It's gaining on us!" Gordo shouted.

Having already hidden the road behind them, the gas was pursuing the wagon, just like a living entity.

"Hurry!"

"It's no use. It's gonna catch up to us," Sergei said, managing to squeeze the words out in a despairing tone as he looked behind them.

Beside them, they suddenly sensed someone.

"D?"

To either side of the driver's seat there was room for three guards to sit. D had come over from his own galloping steed. After forcing the two men to the far end of the front seat, the Hunter stood like a guardian deity gripping the reins. A sudden change came over the horses—that was the only way to describe the way their speed increased.

"Oh, shit!" Gordo exclaimed in amazement, clinging for dear life to a handle on the wagon's roof.

"They're fast. *Damn*, they're fast! These horses have gotta be top notch!"

"That's not it. It's the driver that's incredible!"

Ignoring the closely pursuing cloud of gas, the wagon started to pull further and further away, and before long the road ran into a valley with cliffs rising to either side of it. D raced onward. All he had to do was hold the reins and the team of six cyborg horses tore up the turf like thoroughbreds groomed for the honor of the winner's circle. Even running over the smallest rock made the wagon jolt madly—or perhaps exuberantly.

"Stop it already!" Gordo yelled.

Since D had taken the reins, the man had spent more than an hour clinging to the handle. Along with the wagon his organs had been jolted and his brains rattled, and his bones had been snickering at him. For a whole hour now. The other two gripped the handrails, and the ride was so rough they had all they could do to keep from falling off.

While they were shrieking and groaning, they came out of the valley, the road descended slightly, and between verdant trees the homes of villagers began to come into view. Leaving the shouts and screams of the three men in its wake, the wagon tore into the village of Jelkin. The gates weren't locked during the day. Ignoring the villagers, who didn't know what was going on and thus froze in their tracks, they went down the main street and straight into the square. Sparks shot from the horses' hooves as they struck rocks, and the wagon wheels tore into the earth.

Suddenly, calm descended.

Pushing the hunched-over Sergei off his back, Juke got up. "You okay?" he called up to Gordo on the roof.

“No, I’m dead, you big dope!”

“It wouldn’t surprise me.” Looking down from the front seat, the thought that slipped from his brain was, *Oh, damn!*

A mob of villagers was closing on them, and every last one of them wore a wrathful visage. Naturally some of them carried spades and mattocks, others sickles and longswords—some even had bows and arrows at the ready. There were cries wanting to know who was in charge and the men looked around with eyes as big as saucers, but there was no sign of D.

Turning to the mob, Juke said in a loud voice, “We’re cargo transporters.”

“So you say, but you sped through here like damn maniacs,” one of the farmers shouted, waving a giant scythe. “Scared my granny half to death, and she nearly threw her back out!”

“What are you gonna do if you scared my chickens so bad they stop laying, huh?” a young farmer said, gnashing his teeth.

“Oh, no!” a panicky voice cried out in the distance. “Yapei’s mother started foaming at the mouth!”

“You bastards!”

“You think we’re just bumpkins and you can treat us like shit.”

“Let’s torch the lot of ’em!”

If Juke and his two compatriots dealt poorly with the villagers crushing forward, they wouldn’t get off easily.

Just then, an indistinct voice that sounded like it surely came from a mouth missing quite a few teeth called out, “Come on. Hold up now.”

Suddenly the lust for blood drained from the villagers. The mob parted, revealing an old man bent over parallel to the ground and seemingly a century or two in age. The cane he used was a thick tree branch that’d been polished.

“Long time no see, Mr. Juke,” the codger said with the same slack mouth. “And Mr. Gordo as well—the other fellow’s a newcomer, I take it? It’s been a good six months since the last time I’ve seen you, but I remember you sure enough.”

“We appreciate it, Mr. Mayor,” Juke said, relieved to the very bottom of his soul.

“You fixing to unload your goods? Okay, everybody, let’s give them a hand.” The mayor made a toss of his jaw.

Who knew what had become of their malice, because the villagers were all smiles as women, children, and old folks alike pressed toward the wagon.

“Keep back!” Juke shouted at them. Perhaps he was used to doing this, because his tone was loud and rattling.

The crowd stopped dead.

“Oh, don’t be so cold. I’m just trying to help you out is all,” said the aged mayor.

“That’s okay. Just step back,” Juke said, letting them see the pistol he wore on his hip.

“Okay, set the goods down. And don’t let anyone come any closer,” he ordered his two compatriots.

By the time the goods had been unloaded and they’d received payment from the mayor, it was sunset. Amazingly enough, D had covered a distance that should’ve taken three hours at top speed in less than one. Paying enough to stay for a single night, the trio was preparing to pitch camp when they found that D had come up behind them.

“God!” Juke exclaimed in surprise, inquiring somewhat caustically, “Uh, where have you been up till now, anyway?”

“Why not rent a room in the village?” D inquired.

Where lodging for travelers was concerned, rooms could usually be rented in villagers’ homes in smaller communities, while in larger ones there were full-fledged inns for just such a purpose. If they were to spend just a little more money, there’d be no need for them to sleep on the ground.

“You’ve gotta be joking, D,” Juke said, his snorts resounding through the twilight. “You might be the very top of the heap in Hunting, but you don’t know a thing about anything else, do you? If we gave the folks in this village any kind of opening, they’d pick this wagon clean inside of a minute. Look over there, behind that house and those trees. There’s a couple of people hiding there, right? And every one of ’em is out to get our goods.”

And that was the reason why he’d forced the villagers back when they wanted to help the men unload their cargo.

D glanced at Juke and said, “And yet, you look so happy.”

“Can you tell?”

“Yeah.”

“Being responsible for all this, I’d have to beat the holy hell out of anyone trying to rip us off. But I really like these folks. Out here in the sticks—in a little hick village where you take one step out of town and the place is crawling with monsters raised by the Nobility—they’re living as best they can. Hell, of course they’d wanna steal something. If I was them, I’d have long since lifted half of what we’ve got left. In that respect, they’re kinda thickheaded and kindhearted.” Juke had a tranquil look in his eyes. “Just like my dad.”

But just as he was saying this, Sergei came from the opposite direction and asked, “Could I have just two hours off?”

“Sure—but what are you gonna do?”

“There are ruins on the edge of the village. I’d like to have a peek at them.”

“What?” he exclaimed, teeth jutting from his beard. But glancing at the darkening sky, he told the man, “Be back in an hour and a half.”

Sergei thanked him, and Juke watched the man as he was leaving, his brow furrowed as he said, “He’s a strange one.”

He then turned to look over at D. But nobody was there.

III

Urging his cyborg horse to run as fast as it could, the man arrived at the ruins in less than thirty minutes. Stretching beneath a sky that nearly had the hue of darkness was a wasteland devoid of a single blade of grass. These were called ruins because of the strange things that poked out of the sand. Things that looked like twisted metal antennas, parts of massive cylinders that called to mind turbines, pieces of intricate machines the true nature of which no amount of head scratching was likely to reveal, and chunks of saucer shapes that were rumored to be aircraft—if any archaeologists from the Capital had been there, they'd have been ecstatic over this mountain of treasure.

As Sergei headed into the ruins on his horse, his face wore an intellectual excitement that made him seem like an entirely different person. Approaching a metal form that'd obviously been ravaged by a heat ray, he ran his hand over it, studying it. Circling a half-broken crystalline mass repeatedly, he seemed to bore into it with his gaze. It was as if the Frontier delivery man had suddenly been transformed into a scholar. For Sergei, the better part of an hour spent here was pure bliss.

Looking up at the sky just as the darkness closed over the last trace of light, he clucked his tongue.

"Satisfied now?" D asked from behind him.

Turning, he let out a deep breath and said, "Don't startle me like that!"

D walked over to stand beside him. "The world of the Nobility will be here in less than five minutes. Better head back."

"You're right. I just got so absorbed. Close call." After looking around once more, he muttered regretfully, "Looks like I won't find out after all. Damn!"

"Find out what?" D inquired.

Sergei had no way of knowing how rare that actually was—that it was akin to a miracle. Looking like the head of the class fielding a question in his best subject, he replied, "These aren't really ruins so much as they're the remains of an ancient battlefield. Just look at the stuff lying around here—the wreckage of giant radar dishes, generators, tanks. The better part of them is underground, and if you were to do some serious excavating out here, you'd probably hit Noble weapons no matter where you dug. And do you know what battle was fought here? This is the site where General Gaskell and forces from the Capital vied for supremacy. Sheesh, it makes my skin crawl. Ah!"

With a snarl like a beast Sergei waved his right hand. On seeing D, he finally returned to his senses.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I got carried away again. Looks like this transporter's just a big ol' jabberjaw, eh?"

At that point he tried to avert his gaze, but his eyes were drawn to D's and couldn't pull away.

“There’s supposed to be a repository out here that holds an account of the battle,” he confided. The fervor was beginning to sweep over him once more. “The legendary conflict between the general and the allied forces of Nobility. Wouldn’t you like to know more about it than we already do? More than just what the fight was about and what its outcome was? Even among the Nobility this battle was legendary. In fact, no one even knows how it really played out. Buried somewhere in this battlefield is a building made of marble and an impenetrable metal, and inside it the truth is hidden.”

“Quite the scholar, aren’t you?” D said quietly.

“Give me a break. I’m just a delivery man with a bit of an interest in history is all. Okay, I can accept it now. Let’s head back. Even with you along, D, the night still kinda gives me the creeps.”

D moved forward.

“Uh, the village is that way,” Sergei said, pointing.

“Come with me.”

That was all D said, and as he advanced, his horse started to go faster and faster. Like a man bewitched, Sergei drove his horse on, too. The pair galloped full speed into the heart of the darkness, which was like a black cloud.

After about ten minutes, D halted his steed. Still in the saddle, Sergei adjusted the beam on a light that he carried. That he’d managed to somehow keep up with D was no mean feat. Having finally set the beam, he looked all around from the back of his horse, protesting, “Hey! There’s nothing out here at all!”

Not replying, D walked forward.

“Say, just where do you—” Sergei began, intent on climbing down and going after him, but the darkness was so deep it put terror in his legs and just as he tried to advance, he tripped.

“Oof!”

As he desperately struggled to rise, his eyes caught something on the ground.

“Hey! This is where you went before, isn’t it?”

And saying this, Sergei got back up and dusted off the front of his trousers.

“Damn!” he exclaimed, hurrying off after D. The young man in black was becoming an inky shape, as if to challenge the very darkness. Sergei didn’t feel like being left alone out there.

“There were footprints. Yours, I take it. You must’ve raced to the village like that because you wanted to come out here, right?”

Now he could understand why D had disappeared when they’d first arrived.

Their walk through the darkness ended before they’d gone thirty feet. D halted. Before him stretched nothing save darkness and desolation. But more than this bizarre situation, it was the view of the beautiful Hunter

from behind that left Sergei dazed.

D raised his left hand. Sergei got the feeling he might've been gauging the speed of the almost imperceptible night wind, or else checking the weight of the light from the stark moon in the heavens above. And then, from the front of that hand, an oddly hoarse voice was heard to say, "Okay. Accursed repository, open now!"

From the Hunter's palm, a streak of deep red shot out in the moonlight. It was swallowed by the depths of the darkness far beyond what Sergei could see. When D lowered his hand again as if nothing had happened, not a single drop fell from it.

What in the world? Harboring his doubts, Sergei was terrified both by the fact that he already knew the answer and by the answer itself. Would it come back to life? The legendary thing of which the odd voice had spoken —the accursed repository. Would it?

Through the soles of his feet, slight tremors reached him. The wind pounded him head on, and the pain of it made Sergei put his hand over his face before he could even turn away. Still, he peeked between his fingers. And swallowed hard. His breath froze in his lungs.

A glittering silver cloud that plowed across the earth bore down on him from the depths of the darkness. The only thing that kept him from turning away was the immovable silence of the figure that stood before him. The silvery cloud had already covered both the heavens and the earth, with the ground rumbling noisily. Just as it was about to swallow D, Sergei closed his eyes. Every inch of his body stiffened to meet his fate. Expectations of terror and pain nearly made Sergei pass out. However, he held on to some hope that he'd be all right so long as he was with the young man before him. Incredible air pressure pounded every inch of him —and then stopped.

Sergei opened his eyes. He was scared. Something no one was ever meant to see probably lay before him. He saw D's back. Relief pierced his chest for a heartbeat.

The immense object that towered before the beautiful young man caught Sergei's gaze. The silver cloud. It was moving. Its surface eddied without making a sound. And yet, it wasn't spreading either. Sergei shifted his gaze upward. The silvery cloud seemed to stretch all the way up to the sky. He wasn't sure when it was that he was finally able to speak, only that it was after he noticed something moving to the rear of D.

"What is that thing?"

"The repository," that hoarse voice said. Sergei didn't even have enough presence of mind to wonder whom it belonged to.

"Earlier, the time wasn't right for it to make an appearance. Okay, come with me," D said, walking away.

After some hesitation, Sergei followed after him. Rather than be left alone to face the monsters and ghosts of the battlefield, he definitely preferred to go with this young man as gorgeous as the dead and step into the world of the unknown. However, he wasn't sure whether or not that

was really the right thing to do.

The sea of clouds swallowed D's form. Halting before the whirling miasma, Sergei took a deep breath and then a giant step forward. It didn't even feel like he was shrouded in fog. Sergei opened his eyes. Blue light surrounded him on all sides. For he was in the heart of the cloud. As D stood stock still up ahead, he had to wonder if perhaps the Hunter hadn't moved at all from the very beginning.

"Are we—in the middle of that cloud?"

"Where else do you think we'd be?" the same hoarse voice sneered back at him.

Sergei realized he'd been shut away inside a hidden space. The ceiling, walls, and floor were all eddying cloud. They formed a space twenty or thirty feet in each direction, and that was where the pair stood now.

"Don't stand there like a dolt. Take a look outside. It's not every day you get to see the inside of a repository."

He soon learned what the hoarse voice meant by that. Through the sea of clouds, the scene outside was visible. And the space that surrounded Sergei and D had become a sphere and was now on the move. However, what a vast and desolate panorama it was! Even the ancient battleground itself hadn't been filled with such death, stillness, and nihilism. Dark and black, a plain of steel stretched as far as the eye could see. Despite the fact that darkness crushed his field of view, Sergei could distinctly make out the wreckage of some sort of vehicles and the enormous ruins toppled on the plain.

"This isn't the same as outside. We're inside the repository. The ruins are what's left of defensive systems to guard against invaders, and the vehicles were the tanks and mobile artillery those invaders used," the hoarse voice said steadily. "Those who came in search of the repository's secrets weren't little archaeologist worms like you. They were some of the Nobility's greatest military forces, and there were visitors from another galaxy as well. From what I see now, the fighting inside the repository must've been more intense than it was outside. Look at this ghastly death and destruction."

But compared to the tone of the voice that spoke, the scenery that flowed steadily under his watchful eyes was a million times more tragic. Collapsed buildings snaked off to the distant horizon, and when occasional flashes that didn't seem to be lightning palely illuminated the plain, voices that couldn't be identified as living or machine formed a plaintive chorus. Did they still live, sealed away in the darkness as eternal victims of that light?

"That a shooting star?" the hoarse voice said as something white split the darkness far away. In no time a blue flash shot from the distant terrain, seeming to spread in that direction for the briefest of seconds before vanishing without a trace.

"Or maybe a meteor missile some Noble shot over here? They have bases in the asteroid belt, but it's been thousands of years since anyone

alive was able to control them. Still, I'm surprised they were able to punch a hole in the repository's shields."

Sergei also got the impression that a great part of history was coming back to life.

"Where we're going next, no one else has ever been. No one, that is, except for its creator, General Gaskell—and the Sacred Ancestor."

To Sergei, it looked as if D nodded at the hoarse voice's words.

THE STORED WORLD

CHAPTER 5

I

What's this? Kinda cold, isn't it?" Gordo asked as he squatted by the fire.

Juke had just finished walking around the wagon, and Gordo offered him a tin cup full of hot coffee. After taking a sip, Juke grimaced. The dried coffee travelers used was nicknamed "black chili peppers." Nevertheless, they drank it because its natural properties made it act as a stimulant but without any side effects.

Popping a piece of candy into his mouth to get rid of the taste, Juke crunched on it as he said, "Come to mention it, it is kinda nippy for this time of year."

And having spoken, he turned his eyes to the watchlike module he wore on his right wrist. At the touch of one small button the device switched from the standard Frontier time to a display of his present coordinates or his vital signs. Machinists in the Capital could only produce ten of them a year, making these units exceedingly difficult to get out on the Frontier. Since a person might wind up being killed for it, those that owned them seldom let anyone else see them.

Setting it to thermal mode, he remarked, "Thirty-eight degrees? Normally it should read fifty-five. That's odd."

"You don't suppose the villagers are up to something, do you? You know, like letting us freeze to death so they can snag the rest of our goods?"

Gordo's words only met with a snort from Juke. "You think they've got a climate controller or anything like that in this village? It's probably just some supernatural aura."

"A supernatural aura?"

"If this cooling isn't from a climate controller, that's all it could be. Even the villagers changed into their fur coats."

"By supernatural aura, you mean a monster?"

"I don't know. Seems too strong to be any animal."

"Just perfect," Gordo said, throwing another branch on the fire. Sparks danced upward.

"Yeah, at a time like this, we could use every man we've got. I know about Sergei, but what's going on with D?"

"Good question."

"He kinda gives me the creeps. He might have skill and good looks, but in the end he's still a dhampir, and when he's nearby the air seems . . ."

Cold, just like it was now. The pair exchanged glances. They were getting goose bumps, and not merely due to the night air.

"Hey," Juke said, turning his face to the right and furrowing his brow. "You hear that?"

Closing his eyes, Gordo listened intently and gave a nod. "That's the sound of a carriage."

"You don't mean *that* one?"

"That's right. The one that Noble named Schuma took. It sounds just like it did back at the station."

"Well, I trust your ears, then. What's he been doing up until now? I'd thought he'd long since hurried off to the domain of that long-dead pain-in-the-ass general," Juke cursed, his ears now distinctly catching the ring of iron-shod hooves pounding through the darkness. From the south to the north.

"He's coming," Gordo said, getting to his feet. Cocking the multi-barreled rifle he'd scooped up off the ground, he pressed the selector and set it to fire all barrels in unison. If struck by all thirty-two of the quarter-inch slugs at once, even an enormous monster would be killed instantly.

The sound grew louder. Partly it was because it was drawing closer, but all other sounds had also died out. The village had noticed it, too! Fiendish footsteps approached through the deep, dark night. Juke put his hand on the grip of the bolt gun he wore on his hip, checking that it was still there.

"Fifty yards," Gordo said. The sweat rolling down his brow glittered in the moonlight. "Forty . . . Thirty . . . Twenty . . . Ten . . .
Here he comes!"

At the same time, the horses halted outside the gate. The sounds of hooves and carriage wheels came to a dead stop. Graceful was the only way to describe the manner in which the carriage had halted so suddenly.

While listening to the pounding of their own hearts, the pair of transporters stood stock still in the darkness.

"I am Baron Schuma," a crisp tone informed them. He had to be using a microphone, but it sounded like his unaided voice. "I have business with the Vampire Hunter in this village. Open the gate. If not, I'll have to come in."

It wasn't a threatening tone at all. But the way the night air suddenly froze attested to the fact that it left the villagers terrified.

"I shall do nothing to the village. My business isn't with its inhabitants. I merely wish to see the Hunter. Or would you be so kind as to come out instead, Vampire Hunter?"

Juke closed his eyes. Now they were done for. In a situation like this, he knew only too well how the villagers would react.

"I shall give you three minutes. If I receive no response in that time, I can't be held responsible for what comes next. You had best be prepared for the accompanying casualties."

Before the baron had finished speaking, voices and sounds rang out in various places in the darkness. A door opened, and there was a stampede of feet toward the square—along with angry shouts.

"Where the hell are those guys?"

"In the square!"

"Let's chase 'em out right now. And if they've got a problem with that, we'll kill 'em!"

At the cries of the approaching mob, Juke and Gordo looked at each other and grinned wryly. Not that they weren't scared, but you got into trouble like this when you hauled merchandise all over the Frontier.

"Oh, hell!" Juke exclaimed, downing the rest of the coffee.

"Ready now? I suppose you've got a will all made out, right?" Gordo inquired.

"You write one?"

"Don't be stupid. When would I have time to do that?"

"You must've had plenty of time to do it."

"Shut up."

"I write one up for every run. Don't want all my earthly possessions going to you guys, after all."

"Hmph!"

Around them, waves of villagers were already closing on the pair. Hostility splashed from those waves. And through all that a conversation was taking place.

"So, you haven't written one, then? You haven't, have you?" Juke continued as he looked out over the mob.

"No, I haven't!" Gordo finally snapped. "Why? You trying to say I can't sign on to a transport party without writing a will or something?"

"Don't be ridiculous. But why didn't you?"

"Juke, you dirty dog, you know perfectly well, don't you?"

"Know what?" the man replied, finding his bearded compatriot's behavior disturbing.

"That I don't know how to write!"

"Shit! I didn't know that."

Bending backward in an exaggerated manner, he executed a flip with the flexibility of thin steel. Seeing how both hands hung down by his side—he hadn't exhibited any killing lust or given them an opening for a second—the enraged villagers halted their advance. Those in back, however, didn't stop, so there was a bit of pushing and jostling.

"Well, looks like everyone's here—what can we do for you?" Juke said with a grin.

"Don't play dumb. Send out the Hunter. The Vampire Hunter."

"He was the guy driving the wagon earlier. Where'd he get to?"

In the hands of the villagers there gleamed mattocks, spades, sickles, drum-fed rifles, old-fashioned pneumatic pistols, and gunpowder weapons. The second their murderous intent collided with the villagers' malice and sent sparks flying, the pair's fate would be sealed.

"As you can see, there's no one like that here," Juke said, feigning innocence.

"Where'd he go?"

"I don't know."

An unsettling silence took over the villagers, and then a second later their ring tightened.

"I honestly don't know. A Vampire Hunter couldn't do his job too well

just hanging around us. But he'll probably be back just as soon as he catches the scent of that Noble," Juke said with a toss of his chin in the direction of the gates. "He's a Vampire Hunter, sure enough. You've probably heard of him. D is what they call him."

A clamor went through the villagers. One word was enough to buoy the selfish human psyches. That one word was D.

"D, is it?"

"A Vampire Hunter."

"They say he's never been beat!"

"I've never seen a man so beautiful. That's just not human. And if he's not human—he could even kill a Noble."

"Damn straight!"

"Call in D!"

"Do it soon. Where is he?"

Juke nodded gravely at the faces and voices before him filled with selfish hopes and expectations. "Just leave it to us. He'll be here soon."

A particularly rousing cheer went up. But it was coupled with a new announcement: "You have one minute left."

Chilling the blood of all of them, the Noble's voice issued from beyond the gates. The looks on the villagers' faces underwent yet another change.

"Where's D?"

"Hurry up and get him out here."

"The village is done for. We'll all have our throats torn open and our blood drained!" a girl exclaimed, her cry splitting the night. It wasn't the loss of her life she feared, but the defiling of her soul.

"Thirty seconds left," Baron Schuma said, his voice sounding pleased.

"He ain't gonna make it in time. I guess we'll have to send you two out after all."

The mob descended.

"Hey, Juke!" Gordo called over in a muted tone. "I'm more scared of a human mob than I am of the Nobility."

"You can say that again."

"Twenty seconds . . ."

"Get out of here! Both of you, get going!

The cries of the villagers overlapped. Though the content differed, they all sounded the same.

"Ten seconds."

The villagers pressed closer. Their faces were no longer human. Tinged with madness and fear, they were the faces of demons.

"Five—four—three—two—one."

Like a great wave crashing, the villagers drove forward. But they halted at the neighing of a horse—and a cry of surprise.

"Who—who are you?" And after a short pause, this was followed by, "Wait! Where are you going?"

The cries were clearly those of Baron Schuma. The last thing he said was trampled by hoof beats and the creak of carriage wheels. They were

dwindling at an incredible speed.

"He's gone off!"

"We're saved!"

As the villagers cried out with joy, it came as little surprise that Juke and Gordo looked at each other.

"Where the hell did that bastard run off to?"

"And before he did, just what—I mean, *who*—did he see?"

II

A piercing light penetrated the inky darkness: Baron Schuma's gaze. He was leaning out the carriage window. The reason he'd turned so easily from meeting D and destroying the village was somewhere out in that darkness. Though he couldn't see it, the molecular changes could be measured, and a particular sensor that could locate them showed a green shape on its screen. What he pursued was traveling through space in what might be described as a terribly dilute gaseous state. However, he had no idea as to why his carriage—racing along at a speed of seventy-five miles per hour—showed no signs of closing the gap. Perhaps what he chased was driven by a firm intent?

The better part of a mile from the village, the baron did a double take. The green shape had vanished from his sensors.

"Did it turn into nothingness?" the baron muttered after getting back in the carriage. He then turned to his golden bracelet and ordered, "Stop the carriage."

He was on a moonlit road through the forest. The silhouettes of the trees interlaced with each other. When the baron climbed down from his carriage, he had no shadow of his own at his feet. He took a deep breath of the night air.

"I can go into a frenzy wondering where it's gone, but if I don't know then I guess I don't know. At any rate, I suppose I should fill my lungs with this sapid air and return to that vile hamlet—where D is."

Suddenly the baron looked down at his feet, and then bent over to examine something. In the grass there swayed a blossom whose name he didn't even know. Picking it up and bringing it to his nose, he sought the perfume of the night. However, before the baron could accomplish this, he discarded the flower, which was now just a stalk. Its lovely petals had begun to wither the second his hand touched it, and by the time he'd lifted it up, they'd all crumbled.

"The only ones we can smell are the ones we make ourselves, eh? That may be the Nobles' fate, but I find it a disconsolate one!" he muttered sadly.

Something white stood before him.

"But you're . . ."

The reason he stared at it not with shock but rather in a daze might've been because the form of the girl who appeared like a trick of the night was

far too real. Suddenly materializing before him in front of the village gates, then vanishing, the girl had appeared three times in the distance on the road, enticing the baron—but where was she trying to lead the Nobleman?

The baron's outstretched fingertips touched the girl's arm. The sensation he got was certainly that of skin, soft and real—as was the warm blood that flowed beneath it. Focusing his strength, the baron seized her arm. He then knit his brow. It felt like whatever was between his fingers was melting. The baron squeezed his fingers. But the girl wasn't there.

Moonlight continued to fall on him like a faint drizzle. The baron blinked. The girl was farther down the road, as if that was where she'd been all along. A black shadow fell at her feet.

"You're trying to tell me to take this road?" the baron said, finally understanding. "Fair enough. As you wish, I shall travel through the night. This may be a dream and the trip may be contrary to the wishes of General Gaskell, but I have no fear."

Spinning around, he returned to the carriage. Leaving particles of light brushed from his shoulders whirling in its wake, the carriage sped off.

When the baron halted his carriage once more, it was in part of the ruins. Spotting the two cyborg horses, he climbed down from the vehicle. A silvery cloud eddied beyond the steeds. Boring through the darkness, the eyes of the Noble then began to sparkle.

"So that's it, then? The reason he didn't reply to my summons was because he wasn't there after all. And is this cloud the repository the general mentioned? If so, I wonder what sort of world lies within it. I'll have a look."

The baron's glittering eyes scanned the ground. Finding two sets of footprints, he began to walk after them and was quickly swallowed by the silver cloud.

More than an hour had already passed since they'd begun navigating the sea of clouds. And more than twenty minutes had elapsed since they'd entered the area where the hoarse voice said none but General Gaskell and the Sacred Ancestor had ever set foot. Only the steel plain spread beneath them, with what looked like equally steely mountain ranges appearing from time to time, but aside from that there was no sign of anything moving. Light had long since faded from the horizon.

Wondering just how wide this world stretched within the cloud, Sergei began to sense something disturbing. Even though he wanted to ask about it, D had his back to the man as he remained facing forward, and his unwavering solemnity made it impossible to pose any question.

Was this the Nobles' civilization? Admiration was synonymous with horror here.

Without warning, the blue grew deeper. A forceful impact threw Sergei to the floor.

"So it's still alive after all, is it? It'd be dangerous to keep going like

this."

The man looked up desperately at the source of the hoarse voice. D still stood in the same place.

On the wildly bucking floor, the man felt his bile rise. When the voice spoke of something still being alive, it must've meant the defensive systems. The slumbering machinery found in this new foe wanted an opportunity to display its might.

"You mean to tell me this thing we're riding in doesn't belong to the repository? Whoa!"

A reddish hue challenged the blue of the room. It was a spark. For some reason, Sergei was relieved.

Then a hoarse voice was heard to say, "Oh, my! Looks like the identification devices are malfunctioning. At this rate, we'll be blasted out of the sky!"

"Do something!" Sergei exclaimed as the floor tossed him upward. Apparently it'd taken a hit.

"We're going down!" the hoarse voice said.

Had their vehicle been blasted out of the air?

"We're there."

"Huh?" Sergei said, his eyes bugging out even as he covered his head. Not a second had passed. The figure in black before him began walking from right to left.

"What are you lying around for? Get down off that. You'll be killed!"

Sergei got up like a man possessed. Though his spine and his left shoulder hurt terribly, he didn't have time to worry about it. There was no sign of D. Sergei rushed over toward the left wall. Suddenly, he was suffocating. There was no oxygen. Sharp breaths were impossible, his lungs panted frantically, and his heart groaned.

"Damn—that guy's just a plain old human."

As the hoarse voice spoke, something cold was blown into the man's mouth—and his breathing immediately became easier. It was only after D's left hand came away from him that he coughed loudly.

"Wh-wh-what in the . . ."

"There's no air here fit for human beings. No doubt the aliens who invaded this place changed it to mirror their own world. But relax—now you'll be fine in either."

Sergei looked around through teary eyes. They were right in the middle of the plain. Here and there lay the wreckage of what seemed to be towers and combat machinery. All of them took shapes beyond anything Sergei could've imagined.

"The aliens' weaponry," the hoarse voice said. "This whole area was their forward base. They eventually had to pull out, but up against the Nobility, they did well to get this far. Hey, D—what do you say to poking around to see if we find the secret of the general's power?"

"How?" said the gorgeous voice that hadn't rung in Sergei's ears for some time.

“Go into that building behind you. It’s the operations center. You can control the remaining weaponry.”

Changing direction, the man and the Hunter entered the iron fortress to their rear. The wind struck their backs, and a black metal wall loomed before them. When D collided with it, its surface rippled, flowing over him like water. The same happened with Sergei.

The hoarse voice said something. The sounds were utterly impossible to make with human vocal cords; it may have been an alien language. Suddenly their field of view widened. Everything seemed melted in this space. There wasn’t a single straight line anywhere. All was black and stagnant; no amount of effort could give it any sense of depth. There wasn’t one device or item there that Sergei could understand. The walls and floor were warped like some cephalopod, yet at the same time seemed unrelentingly hard. Recesses in the floor were filled by ash gray forms. A number of lengthy appendages stretched from them.

Are those hands? Feet? Sergei thought, feeling something cold on the nape of his neck. *This is the operations center, right? Are those things in the hollows alien remains?*

"Hey, you—pull that stiff out of there and get in the hole. The size should adjust to fit you. Your head, your toes—any part will do. If you don't, you won't fall under the protection of the defense circuits here in the control room."

It went without saying that Sergei hastened to comply. When he actually tried to do this, he found the recess oddly long and narrow and was puzzled as to how D had managed to get into one. Having been told that any part would do, he shoved his right arm in up to the shoulder. There was no change. It remained hard.

"That seems fine," the hoarse voice said. "Now, shall we show them what the aliens had up their sleeves?"

After a short pause, Sergei groaned. A flash of light had exploded in his eyes. Something was happening in his brain. It was boiling. His brain was on fire.

"Aaaah!"

His whole body bent backward in pain, and every bone in his spine creaked at once. In exchange for his punishment, he was granted vision. His field of view had widened to three hundred sixty degrees.

It's an attack, said the hoarse voice that rang through his head. Each and every word seared itself into his brain. As everything became jumbled and melted together, his eyes alone moved across the landscape. Black lumps rose on the plain of steel, swiftly taking the shape of flying machines that zipped, one after another, toward the horizon. That was the scene that was actually taking place outside. The vast plain was a factory for producing fighter aircraft for the aliens, a hangar, and a runway.

Flight distance 798442891. Still no sign of the enemy, the hoarse voice said. *No, strike that—up ahead, aircraft sighted at 39, 41, 66. This should be fun. Okay, launch the attack.*

This side's fighters numbered exactly a thousand. The installation's weapons were antiproton cannons and missiles. In the darkness, thousands of balls of light sprang into being, and then vanished again. It reminded Sergei of a scene he'd witnessed at a festival in some northern village.

All shots were direct hits, the hoarse voice informed him, quickly adding, *Ah, but they didn't even make a dent. Come to mention it, while we know the position and speed of the targets, we don't know the size or shape. What were those alien bastards attacking all those years ago?*

Here they come, D's voice said. It was composed. Like a crystal-clear night.

In some unknown spot up ahead, points of light formed—and just as Sergei realized this, his whole field of view, his very brain, was engulfed by white light, and he lost consciousness.

When he came to, D was carrying him on his back. They were outside, on the plain of steel. And only the wind blew at them from the distance. He looked back. There was nothing. Had D covered that much ground while the man on his back was unconscious? No, Sergei got the feeling that from

the very start, all of it had been a dream.

Suddenly, he was dropped. While Sergei groaned from landing on his ass, D walked forward without saying anything to him.

"Wait up!"

When he managed to get up and go after the Hunter, he noticed that he felt no pains aside from the fall he'd just taken. That was probably due to D's left hand.

"Hey, explain it to me. What the hell happened?"

"The base was annihilated," D said without ever halting. In his own voice.

"Took a strike from the storeroom's defensive systems," the hoarse voice then said. "Leave it to that Gaskell. This place will probably be safe until the end of the world. It's no surprise the aliens took to their heels after the first battle."

The man was speechless.

"So, it looks like we're left to our own devices in the end. We'll reach our destination soon. You'd best brace yourself for it."

"Soon? What about those defensive systems? Won't they do anything to us? Say, where are we now anyway?"

"About ten times further than we were when that fighter was destroyed. And the defensive systems—they won't do a thing."

The pendant on D's chest gave off a blue light.

"Nothing? Why not?"

In lieu of an answer, D halted and turned.

Even Sergei could make out the human form that stood in the distance on the plain.

"That's . . ."

"Him again? If it isn't a rotten Noble who hangs around whether it's night or day—Baron Schuma," the hoarse voice declared. "Looks like he was able to come this far because the defensive systems were stopped. What'll you do? Gonna take him out?"

The voice was carried off into the darkness.

The baron was approaching. Displaying not even a mote of murderous intent toward this new foe, the gorgeous Hunter awaited him impassively, as if it were fate.

III

At a spot about fifteen feet away, the baron halted. His cape fluttered in the black wind.

"I find you at last," the baron said with an elegant bow. "You've done well to make it this far. The average Noble would've long since been reduced to his constituent atoms, you know. D—who are you?"

"What brings you here?" D inquired. His tone suited the steely plain. It was heavy with death.

"I had intended to just keep going straight to General Gaskell. It would

be embarrassing to be tardy. However, along the way, I had some communication from the general while I was slumbering in my carriage. He told me there was a Vampire Hunter of unearthly beauty in the village of Jelkin. And he wanted him destroyed. Such are the circumstances behind my hasty return."

"Gaskell has come back to life?"

"The invitation bore his name and was in his handwriting," the baron said, tapping the end of his cane to his forehead.

"Who else received an invitation from him?"

"Unfortunately, that I don't know."

"Why were you summoned?" D asked, his questions direct.

"I really couldn't say. No, I'm not trying to hide anything from you. In fact, the agreement that I would respond when summoned dates back to the time of my father."

The baron fully expected that D would accept this. But the gorgeous young man maintained his silence.

Left with no choice, the baron tapped his walking stick against his forehead again and continued, "About a hundred years ago my father entered into an agreement with the general that if a signed invitation from him were to arrive, I would go to him without any questions. The existence of a diary recording that agreement was also noted in the invitation. It further stated that until the general explicitly told me I was finished, I was to do exactly as he commanded."

"That's a raw deal."

"It certainly is," the baron said with a thin smile. "When and why did the general come back to life, and why has he summoned me—these are all questions of great interest to me. But D, I must ask you, why have you come out to this repository?"

Sergei suddenly stared at the young man's dashing profile. That was the very thing he'd most wanted to know.

"Records were left here of the battle between the general and the forces from the Capital. Is that what you were after?"

Nothing from the Hunter.

"Since days of old, no personage among the Nobility has been as shrouded in mystery as General Gaskell. To commemorate his triumph over the forces from the Capital, he built a repository here and sealed in it an account of his life. That's what you were after, isn't it? But why?"

"Gaskell will be an obstacle to my journey."

"Your journey?"

"You must've seen the transport wagon."

The baron's eyes bulged.

"You can't be serious," he said. "It can't be—I'd noticed that you were acting as a sort of guard for the transport party, but did you seriously break in here just to discharge that duty—to protect a bunch of lowly human delivery men wandering the Frontier? And you mean to tell me my role is to dispose of a Hunter charged with such a boring obligation? Is that really

the case?"

As he let out a groan, the baron covered his face with one hand. The gesture was so exaggerated it seemed as if acting might've been a hobby for him.

"Oh, D, what a foolish thing you've done. How pointless it was to come back for you. But forget about all that. D, would you be so kind as to turn back now?"

"Turn back and do what?"

"If you desist from raiding the repository, there shall be no need for me to slay you here. I should like to put that off for another time. You see, watching you do battle back at the station, I was a tad impressed."

"It may be that the general's desire to have me slain has nothing to do with the repository and its contents."

On hearing this, the baron narrowed his gaze. "Now that you mention it, I heard nothing about you going after his storeroom. Although I knew you were in the area, even I didn't have your exact location. Why, then, would the general be out to get you?" Here his eyes grew thread thin as he muttered, "Is that to mean the girl was sent here by the general?"

"Girl?"

At the hoarse voice, the baron donned a dubious expression.

"While I was paying a call on the village, there appeared to me a young lady who led me here. Although she quickly vanished."

"What was she like?" This time it was D that spoke.

The baron explained.

After he'd finished, a hoarse voice from the vicinity of D's left hand said, "It's Rosaria, ain't it? But what happened to the girl? To make her lead a Noble, one who's out to get you, *right* to us, I mean. I guess the general must've brainwashed her or something."

"What now?" D asked. His question was directed at the baron. The air froze.

The baron shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I'd completely forgotten. I was ordered to slay you. However, as I just said, I wouldn't have to if you'd be good enough to turn back now."

"You'd go back on your father's promise?"

"I have my own way of doing things, you see. At my age, I see no particular reason to be concerned with the relationship between my own father and a general I've never laid eyes upon."

"We're already on our way," D said.

"Very well, then," the baron replied. And that was all. That alone was enough to catapult the pair into a battle to the death.

Sergei wanted to leave the scene but was stiff with tension. He couldn't move his legs.

D's hands hung naturally by his sides, while the baron pointed the tip of his stick at the Hunter's chest. What would arise from the current standoff?

"Ah!" the baron gasped quietly, taking his eyes off his opponent. D

followed suit after sensing a presence behind him. Twenty to twenty-five feet away stood a pale young woman.

"Rosaria," said the hoarse voice. D wasn't one to speak other people's names. "I'd thought she'd fallen victim to the general's old tricks—but it looks like that ain't the case, eh?"

"Is that the girl?" D asked the baron.

"Indeed. Is she some acquaintance of yours? How ironic that she would lead one who seeks your life right to you."

"Help," said a feeble voice that drifted with the wind. "Save me, D!"

"Where did you go?" D inquired. "And where are you going now?"

"Help," Rosaria repeated. Her pale face was colored with grief and fear. "I don't know how this happened to me—help me."

D stepped forward.

"Wait," the baron said, stopping him. Lowering his walking stick, he swiftly stepped in front of D, making no attempt to disguise the gleam of curiosity in his eyes as he stared at Rosaria. "Hmm. I didn't realize General Gaskell was an expert at making space vanish. Wait a moment, and I shall help you."

"Can you do it?" the hoarse voice inquired.

"I'll thank you not to speak in that odd voice. Step back."

Raising his stick, the baron slowly began to move the tip of it as if to strike the space. "First, we have to find a weak spot. Here's one."

In the blink of an eye, his stick came to a gentle stop at a spot three feet in front of him and about six feet off the ground.

"I'll seal it," he said. His cane came away immediately. "Done. Next—"

The walking stick pierced Rosaria.

"The girl herself has undoubtedly become the passageway through space. She must be fixed in this location."

The tip of the stick gave off a blue light.

"No!" Rosaria exclaimed.

It soon became apparent that her cry wasn't directed toward the baron's actions. The surface of the ground rose in snakelike shapes that tried to swallow the baron headfirst. A second later they broke into a million pieces, revealing the baron and his upraised cane.

More cylinders also attacked D. Perhaps God was more repulsed by the thought of them touching D than the Hunter himself, for before D's longsword flashed out, a bolt of lightning flew down and shattered the head of every last steely black serpent.

"D!" Rosaria called out. Through her form, the scenery behind her became visible.

"Oh, no!"

Before the baron could jab her with his cane, Rosaria faded away.

"I'm waiting, D. Waiting—"

Only her voice remained on the plain of steel.

"Too late, was I?" the baron said disappointedly as he made a swipe with his cane.

“That’s an unusual walking stick,” D remarked. “They say Gaskell got a hint about how to move through space from someone. Would that be your father?”

“Well informed, aren’t you?” the baron said, widening his eyes in feigned surprise. “More than ever, I see you are no ordinary Hunter. But alas, you’re mistaken. The technique didn’t come from my father. It came from me.”

How many centuries—or millennia—had this man actually lived?

Smacking the palm of his left hand with the stick, he said, “It’s also thanks to General Gaskell that this contains circuits to modify and repair the defensive systems.”

The Nobleman’s body glowed pale blue—it’d been pierced by lightning. Letting out a slight sigh, the baron raised his walking stick high above his head. The light was drawn into the end of it. One bolt of lightning carried a billion volts. And all of the energy from the flashes that fell in rapid succession was effortlessly absorbed by the baron’s cane.

“This is a waste of time. Might I ask you to leave this to me?” the baron inquired, looking askance at D.

“Good enough.”

“In that case . . .”

Holding the stick in his right hand parallel to the ground, the baron stood ready and aimed it at the distant horizon.

“Modification circuits to full power,” the baron said, the words coming like an announcement.

The wind that crossed the plain grew more violent. D’s coat and the baron’s cape streamed out, and in the heavens there echoed a roar unlike any sound on earth.

“You’d best exercise caution,” the baron declared, his eyes squinting in the wind. “The defenses are increasing their power, and they aim to slay me. Though I have every confidence in the modification circuits, I can’t say what’ll happen in the end. There is cause to fear you might become embroiled in this. If one of us is injured, our showdown shall have to wait for another time. Are you amenable to that?”

“That’ll be fine.”

“Excellent. Well, then . . .”

At the far reaches of the plain, a pale light sparked. Glittering like sunlight, it wavered, tapered, and took the shape of a woman.

“That’s . . .”

Sensing something strange, Sergei backed away. As a living organism, his sense of life or death was telling him to run for all he was worth.

The woman who was untold thousands of miles away could be seen as clearly as if she were right before them, and they could also tell she was the same size as themselves. The woman raised both hands in the air and yelled something. Was it a scream? It might just as easily have been a song.

“Oof!”

Clutching his heart, the baron fell to one knee on the ground. He’d just

experienced an incredible pain. At precisely the same time, D also reeled.

The hoarse voice said, “On hearing that voice, even the mightiest of Nobles will have his heart stopped and his blood befouled. All machines stop working, reduced to simple metal boxes. But that’s the defensive system’s last stand. It’s crazy. So crazy it can’t tell the difference between you and that *thing*. Is there anything we can do?”

D supplied the answer to that. He’d stood up straight right where he was. Without so much as glancing at where the baron and Sergei were doubled over in agony, he drew the sword from his back and made a great swipe with it. Did he intend to hurl it at that woman? She might be thousands, if not tens of thousands, of miles away, if she was anywhere at all.

The blade was hurled. There was no need to wait. A heartbeat later, the woman tumbled backward clutching her heart, and the outline of the sword could indeed be glimpsed between her breasts.

The world was stained with crimson. Feeling like a gigantic hand was crushing his heart, Sergei lost consciousness without making a sound.

THE TRANSPORTERS

CHAPTER 6

I

Air surged into his lungs. When he came around, Sergei found that he was lying at the bottom of a hole with sides that sloped like an ant-lion pit. D was right in front of him, having just pulled his left hand away. In the palm of that hand was what looked to be an animated human face, but then he blinked his eyes and it was gone. Or rather, D had lowered his hand.

"Where are we?" he asked, still struggling with the cold air that filled him.

"At the site of the ancient battlefield. Not ten feet from where we tied our horses."

He didn't even think to himself, *That's impossible!* So long as that young man was around, things like this were bound to happen. He looked up overhead. The stars were out.

"How much time has passed?"

"Exactly a minute."

This time, his mouth actually formed the words. "That's impossible!"

Sergei looked all around. The hole was a hundred feet in diameter, and above it the moon and stars shone. The hole was roughly fifteen feet deep.

Turning his back to Sergei, D bent over and reached one hand down to the floor of the pit. Catching hold of something, he pulled.

"Wow!"

A cry of frank amazement flew from Sergei's lips.

Five somewhat slender fingers had latched onto the edge of a thick sheet. What rose from the ground was a stone tablet six feet long and three feet wide. It must've weighed in excess of a ton.

Was this the monstrous strength of a dhampir—the power of one of Noble blood? Sergei was left speechless.

Leaning the tablet back against one of the earthen walls, D brushed the dirt from it and pressed the palm of his left hand against it. He didn't seem particularly concerned with Sergei. And Sergei didn't feel alienated. The fact that the world of the gorgeous Vampire Hunter had no connection to his had already seeped into the marrow of his bones.

"Did you get that okay?" the hoarse voice asked. To Sergei, it seemed that the Hunter's left hand had to be talking.

"No."

"Then it's locked, as I might've expected. Looks like it'll take some time to undo that. Bring it along," said the gruff voice.

Sergei was bewildered as to how the Hunter was going to carry away a stone tablet that looked to weigh about a ton.

D's right hand rose. When he swung it down artlessly, the massive tablet shattered easily beneath his fist, instantly reduced to a mound of dust. Sticking his right hand into the huge pile, he quickly caught hold of something and plucked it out.

"See that?" he said. Stuck to the tip of the finger he held up to Sergei's eye was a bit of metal a fifth of an inch square.

"What is it?"

"An account of General Gaskell's victory and his personal history."

"That . . ."

This was the only word Sergei managed to say. What of the endless plain of steel from earlier, and the lightning? What of the alien base? Had all of it been an illusion?

"It was all real," D said, as if he'd read Sergei's mind.

Sergei nodded. "What happened to the baron?"

"He was thrown by the shock when the defensive system was destroyed. Don't know where he went."

We probably haven't seen the last of him, Sergei thought. *A freak like that wouldn't be killed that easily*.

"Let's go."

By the time the man turned to where D had spoken, the figure in black had already begun to climb the slope. Muttering complaints to himself about who'd left this hole here, Sergei walked up the collapsing side as well, finally reaching the top. The horses were fine.

"No ride for the baron here, eh?" Sergei said, and after looking around he turned his eyes to the ground. There were ruts left by wheels both coming and going. Had the carriage brought its passenger out here and taken him away again? Or had it gone off in search of him when he vanished?

As he stood there absentmindedly, a succinct remark reached him, heading off in the same direction from which they'd come: "Let's go."

Was it a dream, or was it real?

Giving his head a shake, Sergei got on his horse.

They'd covered roughly half the distance back to the village of Jelkin when they met Juke traveling in the opposite direction. Informing the two of them as to what had happened back at the village, Juke also told them that he'd guessed the damned baron's sudden disappearance was due to his going after them, and that they'd left the village because their welcome had worn thin. Leaving Gordo to wait with the wagon in the middle of the road, he alone had gone into the ancient battlefield to see what was happening.

"What about that damned baron?"

After letting out a sigh, Sergei replied, "He never came."

"Huh?"

Never taking his eyes off the dubious Juke, he continued, "Nothing happened out on the ancient battlefield. There was just old junk lying around. The baron must've gone someplace else."

"But you—"

"Nothing happened." Repeating this, Sergei glanced briefly at D and said, "I just had a strange little dream, right?"

D didn't reply.

Sergei thought, *That's fine*. After all, the handsome young man

belonged to an entirely different world from theirs. A world of endless night and moonlight and wind. It came as no surprise that he grew taciturn now.

"Our business is done in Jelkin, so let's go camp somewhere for the night. Tomorrow we set off for the village of Krakow," Juke said, grinning as if nothing but their next stop interested him. For the transporters who traveled the Frontier, maybe there was no such thing as yesterday.

The three of them returned to the road.

Gordo stood out in front of the wagon looking like he didn't know what to do. From the look of relief that rose on his face on seeing them, Sergei sensed that something had happened. Apparently Juke did as well, and on dismounting he asked, "What happened?" He also scanned their surroundings with a sharp gaze, for good measure.

After hemming and hawing, Gordo gave a meaningful look to D, who was still in the saddle.

"Was it the baron?" Juke asked, understandably tense.

"No, I just . . ."

"What is it, eh? Get a grip, man. Pull yourself together."

"I just thought it must pay to be a looker."

"What?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Gordo reached for the door to the living quarters behind the driver's seat. Inside were beds for four people. On peering inside, Juke exclaimed, "Huh?" and quickly looked back at the others.

"What? What is it?" Sergei said, following after him. He was intrigued. Although he also quickly turned again, his eyes were full of surprise when he looked up at D.

"Hey, D," he said, tossing his chin at the room behind the door.

Dismounting, D calmly approached the door. Still as a wintry night, what his dark eyes beheld was a girl with long hair lying on a bed. She was snoring faintly, as if she'd just returned from a long trip.

It was Rosaria.

II

The ride to the village of Krakow took two full days. During that time—or to be more precise, on the very first morning—Rosaria opened up to the rough men.

They'd camped out, and even Gordo—who'd been on guard duty—had fallen fast asleep, but before they knew it, breakfast had already been prepared. The usual "cup of hell" had been replaced by insanely strong coffee, and the instant-food packs that were ready three seconds after you pulled a string had been transformed into crispy bacon and eggs, golden brown toast, and vegetable soup.

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I went ahead and helped myself to what was in the freezer," the girl apologized shyly, while the men could only stare at

her stupidly.

When it came to travel out on the Frontier, it was always a dangerous undertaking, but for transporters carrying valuable goods, the danger was particularly acute. If members of the party took so much as a pebble by the side of the road to be a threat, they'd be on it mercilessly in a second's time. Needless to say, all manner of bandits, monsters, demons, ghosts, or any other fiendish entity would attack them to get at both their goods and themselves. For this reason, transport parties needed to have skilled guards and more than enough weaponry. To make the rounds in three villages they'd need ten men at the very least, while covering a whole Frontier sector would generally call for more than thirty. That was why transport companies were constantly trying to recruit new personnel and had to enter into contracts with arms dealers in the Capital to acquire the latest firepower. At present, the run Juke and the others had undertaken would hit five villages in all, but common sense said that doing so with a mere five people was akin to committing suicide. However, quality could be better than quantity at times. The three transporters were forced to believe that.

After eating, the first danger zone they encountered was a heavy forest. Frontier forests were teeming with demons and supernatural creatures—it was said you gained a gray hair for every hundred yards you traveled through one. As soon as they entered, the whole group sensed countless sources of malice and eeriness. Every inch of their flesh ached as if it were being needled, and their body temperatures dropped by the minute. And as soon as terror swept over them, the pernicious fangs would flash into action.

But there was none of that. Before they were out of the forest again, there were thousands or tens of thousands of times when it wouldn't have been at all strange for monsters to have attacked them, but those monsters never descended, as if they'd lost their nerve. Not only that, but from stands of trees where branches spread so wide they kept any beam of light from passing, fear and horror had emanated. They knew why. There could be only one reason. Just before they'd entered the forest, D had sat down in the driver's seat. That was it. That alone had been enough to leave the ravenous, bloodthirsty monsters cowering, as if they'd been laid low by the Hunter's handsome visage.

It was sometime after they emerged from the forest that Gordo let the word "incredible" slip from his mouth.

"I'm not scared of no monsters, but I can't scare the damned things either. To do that so easily . . ." Juke said, his admiration showing what was really to be feared.

Up in the driver's seat, D had the reins in his hands, his profile glowing palely even in the sunlight. They had to wonder if perhaps the supernatural creatures had remained silent because they were captivated by his beauty.

As noon approached, Gordo whispered to Juke, "Hey, aren't the horses

crazy fast? I'm positive they're going nearly twice the usual speed."

The reply was this: "Of course so."

In addition to their fearsome bodyguard, they were joined on this trip by a lovely cook and songstress. Where transport-party meals were concerned, time and nutrition were the first considerations. If it was reasonably filling while providing sufficient nutrients and calories and could be done quickly enough to not keep them off the road too long, then the taste and appearance were, respectively, secondary and tertiary concerns. But in Rosaria's pale and dainty hands, their meals became something else entirely. On seeing the food laid out on the table, the men's eyes went wide, and they couldn't even sit down.

"What are you doing?" a hoarse voice called out teasingly from where D leaned back against the wagon.

"Sh-shut your trap!" Gordo shouted, his face reddening. "You and your funny voices. H-how are we supposed to eat this f-f-food?"

"Oh, is there some problem?" Rosaria said, bringing her hand to her mouth as if she'd done something wrong. The rifleman began to quake.

"No. Let's eat," Juke said, taking a seat.

"Count me in," Sergei added, following suit.

"Use your napkins, please."

Looking at each other, the two men opened the folded pieces of cloth on the table and tied them around their necks. They tied them so tightly they looked like baby bibs.

"What are you looking at?" Juke sneered at Sergei with a derisive look.

"What's *your* problem? *Oh, my little baby, can't have you slobbering all over yourself now . . .*"

Just as they were about to come to blows, a sweet yet strangely stately cry struck both men full in the face and a hand slammed down on the table.

"Be quiet! I won't have any commotion at mealtime! The next time you do this, you'll go without!"

Certain situations arise that call for certain people. In this situation, that person was Rosaria.

"Yes, ma'am," Juke said, reluctantly returning to the table.

"Okay," Sergei said, following suit, and then the two of them began noisily working their cutlery.

"Are you dead set against this?" the matriarch asked the last insurgent. Her tone was gentle to the very end.

"W-well, of course I am. You won't get me to cave. Out on the Frontier, we've got our own way of doing things," he retorted, taking a rebellious stance.

Beside him, Juke said in a menacing tone, "Hey, pass the pepper."

As Gordo trembled, his mouth and nose twisted, and the other man told him, "Okay. Well, we'll make something fit for you to eat. Have a

seat."

Juke quickly cleared away the knife and fork and colorful plate from before Gordo.

"Here you go!"

A slab of bacon thudded on the table.

"This is for you, too," he said, giving him a raw egg in a bowl. It was followed by a head of cabbage, whole bulbs of garlic, and potatoes with the skins still on.

"How's that suit you?" And with that he stuck out his tongue.

"It, uh, it suits me just fine. Don't mind if I do!"

Gordo was too old for this sort of nonsense, but now his dander was up, too. Treating the slab of bacon like it was a steak, he sliced off a thick piece and put it in his mouth, then clawed a chunk out of the cabbage and stuffed that in as well.

As he was going great guns, his colleague beside him commented, "Serves him right."

"Yeah. This is how civilized folks live. Oh, I almost forgot—what would you say to offering him a lemon?"

"Hell, yeah—I mean, indeed. *Oui, monsieur*."

As the pair continued to harass him in this fashion, Gordo finally exploded. Having pulled off the apron he was using as a bib, he threw it at Juke and Sergei, shouting, "You traitors. Being won over by a little slip of a girl. Get ready to take what you got coming."

The pair looked at each other.

"This is a fine mess, Juke."

"It certainly is, Sergei."

"Getting so worked up over a simple meal. I never wanna wind up one of those people."

"What's your problem, you numbskulls?"

"Let him be, Sergei. People learn the error of their ways soon enough."

"How right you are, Juke," Sergei replied, taking a piece of steak dripping with gravy and chewing it noisily.

"You bastards!" Gordo snarled at that point.

"Don't mind if I do," D said, taking a seat.

"*Et tu, Brute?*"

"It's not often you see a spread like this on the Frontier. There's no way I could pass up tasting it."

"You goddamn pretty boy—always acting like you're from another world. But what you're doing is no different from those thugs right there. Oh, this burns my britches!"

"In that case, why don't you have some, too?" the Hunter said, pushing aside the plate of bacon and setting a steaming bowl of soup in its place.

As he grunted unintelligibly, the original plates were rearranged and Rosaria went so far as to personally wrap the napkin around his neck. There was nothing Gordo could do, and the next thing he knew he was

holding a knife and a fork. On putting a piece of the steak in his mouth, the man got a different look in his eyes.

Seeing that this was no act, Rosaria inquired concernedly, “Does it taste okay?”

Giving no answer, Gordo swallowed what he had in his mouth and stared at his plate without moving a muscle. The gaze of his two colleagues —and that of D—was trained on his massive form.

“Don’t you like it?” Rosaria asked dolefully and, as expected, he still didn’t reply.

With a disappointed expression, he somewhat bashfully cut another piece of steak and put it in his mouth. After devouring the whole thing, he asked, “Is supper gonna be more of the same?”

“No. I’m sorry; this was just something I wanted to try. Next time, it’ll be back to the usual.”

Snorting, Gordo turned away dejectedly and said, “Hold off till tomorrow on doing that.”

That night at their campsite, Juke muttered in a tone that was entirely too loud, “Damned if we won’t be there by tomorrow afternoon!”

“It’s only natural,” Sergei replied, giving him a blank look.

“Seems when there’s a looker in the driver’s seat, even the horses go that extra mile,” Gordo said.

A short while earlier he’d been hanging around the back of the wagons and Juke, who was lying down, had asked him what he was thinking about. “Tonight’s menu,” he’d replied, only to be met with a glare. That meal had since been finished and the night had begun to grow deeper, so it was now time to decide who would stand watch this evening.

“I’ll do it,” D offered.

“That’d be setting a bad precedent,” Juke said, so they drew straws and Gordo lost.

Transporters had to get an early start. Juke and Sergei hastened to their beds while Gordo and D remained outside.

Watch duty consisted of circling the wagon a number of times and making sure the fire didn’t die out. Around the middle of the night the understandably tired Gordo sat down by the campfire, poured a cup of coffee from what was over the embers, and began to drink it. The moon was so bright and pale it seemed to glow with its own light, and the wind that blew from the depths of the forest carried the baying of wolves.

“Care for some?” Gordo said to D, who was leaning back against the wagon.

“Sure,” D said, uncharacteristically taking the cup and downing the steaming-hot contents without another word.

“You gulped the whole thing down in one shot?” Gordo said, his eyes wide with amazement. “Sure as I live, you dhampirs are mighty different. I’m stunned. You know, I hear Nobility can drink molten lava and still be smiling just as pretty as you please, but is that really true?”

"Probably."

"Why would a dhampir wanna be a Hunter of all things? That's like killing your own, in a manner of speaking."

Setting his cup down on the ground, D asked, "Do you hate dhampirs?"

"Yeah, they give me the creeps. Ol' Juke likes to fight, so it's his nature to respect someone when he hears they're tough, but I just see things the way they really are. I don't care if they hunt the Nobility; I don't care what they do. Dhampirs are half Noble, and there's no denying that. In other words, they're half monster. You think someone like that can be trusted?"

"Good point," a hoarse voice agreed.

Grimacing, Gordo said, "I'm begging you, knock if off with the ventriloquism. If you've gotta use a different voice, make it a sexy female one . . ."

The man's unreasonable demand dwindled and was swallowed by the darkness. A lovely singing voice had rung out in the night air from nowhere in particular.

III

"Is that a land siren?" Gordo said, quickly pulling out his earplugs.

No one had ever seen the source of those sad, sweet voices that flowed through the midnight air. The men they lured into leaving the land of the living were always found as withered corpses the next morning. However, whatever it was that they saw in their final seconds, the dead always wore smiles of supreme bliss. Fortunately, all that was needed to resist the unholy singers who tempted those who traveled by land or sea was nothing more than earplugs. At present, experienced travelers were able to pass the night in peace, enraptured by the faint song echoing in the depths of ears plugged with cloth or paper.

However, what this pair heard wasn't the song of an unholy creature. Rosaria was standing in front of the door to the living quarters.

Somewhere a shining windmill
Changes the wind when it hits
The scent the breeze carried becomes a song
Rushing to the village in spring
Only to the ears of my love

D was gazing at the girl who sang out in the moonlight. Gordo—and Juke and Sergei, who'd both poked their heads out of the open door—listened intently.

Her song finished, Rosaria gave a natural reaction to the applause she drew. Surprise flushed the girl's cheeks. Going over by the campfire as if taking flight, she crinkled her brow and said, "Dear me, were you listening?"

“You’re something else. On top of your cooking, you had another weapon tucked away in your arsenal, did you?” Gordo said, sounding thoroughly enchanted. “Would you take a request next?”

“No. That’s the only one I know. One song is all Papa ever taught me.”

“Stingy old man, was he?”

“Don’t speak ill of my papa.”

Rosaria’s arched eyebrows got Gordo to hold his tongue, after which he said in a strangely pensive tone, “No, you’re right about that. It ain’t right to speak ill of someone’s father, sure enough.”

The campfire crackled—D had thrown a branch on it. The flames transformed the faces of the trio into a stage for dancing shadows. Mournful. Laughing. Angry. Crying.

“My father was a huntsman,” Gordo began. “He was good at it. I thought he’d always be able to take care of me, my mom, and my three brothers and sisters all on his own.”

Once again, there was the call of the wolves. Then the night quietly wore on.

“We all had a future. It was a rough existence out in the middle of nowhere, but we all dreamed of becoming a huntsman, or marrying one.”

And then one winter’s day a woman had come and begged merely to stay the night. His mother insisted there was something strange about her, but his father thought the winter’s night was too cruel and invited her in.

“But the next day the woman didn’t leave. She said supernatural creatures had attacked her village, separating her from her parents and leaving her on her own. My father told her she should stay until the snow had melted.”

It was the evening of the fifth day that the woman showed her fangs. When Gordo and his father returned from hunting, there was blood spattered all over the house, inside and out, and they heard the screams of his little sister. Bursting into the house, Gordo and his father saw his mother and siblings lying on the floor, their faces frozen in death. The shock was so great that the two of them were locked in a daze when something suddenly slammed down at their feet, sending up a bloody spray. His little sister.

"My father fired right away. It was a gunpowder rifle. The woman was left with only half a face. The left half, I think. But she grinned with that half and went for my father. Before she could tear his throat open with her claws, my father blew the other half of her face away. And do you think that was the end of it? No, the Hunter here knows different. Even with her whole head missing, the woman didn't die. Reaching out with both hands, she started prowling around. Lucky for us she didn't know which way she was headed. I grabbed a stake that was lying in the living room and jabbed it through the woman's back."

Gordo's voice faltered. Apparently the memory remained sharp. Something glittered its way down his suntanned cheeks.

"The woman died. But she didn't turn to dust, and she didn't rot away either. She'd moved around by day, too, so she wasn't no vampire. She was a victim. Bitten but not changed, she played innocent to get into my house, and then wiped out my family. You know, my mother was so kind. My little brother was smart, and my little sister was so sweet. And my father was strong."

Roughly rubbing at his eyes with the backs of his hands, Gordo spread the fingers of both hands.

"Ever since that, I haven't been able to handle a blade. See, in the palm of my hand, I can still feel what it was like stabbing into her. If you can't carve your prey, you can't be a huntsman. That much was clear, as a man can't rightly live on the Frontier without being able to use a knife."

"Why'd you decide to be a transporter?" D inquired.

This man who didn't use blades had chosen a grueling career. Therein lay D's question.

"Reverse psychology. I figured choosing a line of work where I'd be forced to use knives and swords against monsters might do the trick."

"And if it doesn't? What about those who have only you to rely on? Will you be able to pick up a knife when the time comes?"

"I don't know—but I sure like to hope so."

"If you can't, your colleagues will die. Then you'll be a murderer. Don't think getting yourself killed is the worst that can happen."

Gordo's body shook. D's words had pierced his heart like a blade.

"What you're running away from isn't blades, it's *fighting* with blades. The Frontier doesn't need anyone who's going to freeze up in a situation like that. Maybe you should go to the Capital."

Letting out a long sigh, Gordo shook his head. Turning, he looked at

Rosaria. His expression was kind.

"Your song got me talking some boring crap. Oh, I didn't mean that as a complaint. Now I've gone and done it. You're not gonna want to travel with us anymore, eh?"

"That's not it at all," Rosaria replied, wiping her eyes. As she'd listened to Gordo's story, she'd been crying. "I'm sure you'll get back to normal."

"Really? Thank you," Gordo said, smiling brightly. "If I do, I'll become a huntsman."

"You wouldn't stay a transporter?"

"Are you kidding me? Who'd want this low-down, rough-and-tumble job?"

The two of them laughed together.

It was at that moment that part of the world was stained blue. The stillness was shattered by a high-pitched sound.

"Hide!" Gordo shouted to Rosaria. "Something tripped the warning sensors," he cried into the living quarters as he ran to the back of the wagon.

During the night, electromagnetic waves coursed through an iron net that was set up around the wagon to defend against wild animals. A powerful but highly compact dynamo sent three hundred thousand volts of current through the net to fry any foes trying to get inside. Of course, it was of no use against heavily armored attackers or those with skin resistant to electricity. What's more, from the showers of sparks, it had to be something big this time.

Coming around the vehicle, Gordo exclaimed, "Jeez!"

In front of the torn iron netting that was giving off purplish smoke stood D with sword in hand. At the point Gordo had started speaking to Rosaria instead of him, the Hunter had most likely noticed the presence of an intruder. Gordo's body trembled with embarrassment and with amazement at the young man.

"What happened?" he asked, coming to a dead stop from his run.

Every inch of D radiated a ghastly aura that seemed to sear the man from head to toe. His blood and bones froze, yet Gordo realized he was catching only the tiniest bit. D's aura was focused ahead of him—off to the right of Gordo. Though the man strained his eyes, he saw nothing.

An invisible beast? he thought. *No, this isn't part of their range. They're always found—*

At that moment the world exploded and Gordo shielded his face. A shock wave hit him right in the kisser. The multishot rifle he carried grew strangely heavy. Aside from that, all that remained in the moonlight was the gorgeous Hunter.

"You okay?" he called to Gordo, but the man couldn't move right away, for he'd noticed that the grass by his feet was matted down. Apparently it was an unseen monstrosity that only returned to its original state in death. And it had fallen without making a sound.

The first thing that became visible was a flow of bluish-green liquid.

As it bubbled up like a fountain, around it a paler version of the same color spread, exposing the lines of what had fallen. It was a creature about six and a half feet tall. Although the body on the whole resembled that of a bear, it had no fur and was much slighter in build. The most disturbing part of all was that the head alone was just like a human's, but that wasn't what froze Gordo in his tracks. The creature's body was pointed toward him with both arms reaching out. Each hand had three fingers with claws eight inches long, and those claws were within a yard of his toes. Clearly the creature had decided to go after not D, but Gordo.

From behind them, Sergei and Juke ran up with weapons in hand. Eyeing the beast that'd been killed instantly, one of them cocked an eyebrow and said, "But isn't that a—"

"It sure is," Gordo said with a nod. "A joffo dragon. They're not supposed to be around here. These monsters only live further north—in Gaskell's domain. Even with all the Nobility's power, making transparent creatures was no easy task. That's why he only used them inside his dominion, to strike down invaders. But now *it's* the invader."

"What's this supposed to mean? Their control mechanisms can't handle them anymore?" Juke asked, tilting his head.

"You know something about this, D?"

At Gordo's query, all eyes turned to D. His clear, deep eyes coolly drew in their gazes—and threatened to suck the very souls from them in the process.

"Tomorrow, you'll understand when we reach the village of Krakow," the exquisite Hunter said in the voice of the night. "Get some rest—it's a long trip. And I believe I'll stand watch tonight after all."

Rage seized Gordo. "That's my job," he snapped like a hungry dog.

D looked him straight in the eye and asked him, "If you'd seen it, would you have shot it?"

"Of course."

"Then you'll have to wait until tomorrow. It's all too easy to miss the mark when you haven't had enough sleep."

"Yeah, let's do that, Gordo," Juke said to him. "Something's just not right about this area. It's not like it usually is. More things we have no idea about might show up. Tonight we'll leave it to D, and then tomorrow we'll choose a guard for the night again."

"Okay," Gordo grumbled with a reluctant nod.

The three men started to walk back to their sleeping quarters. After they'd gone five or ten feet, Gordo turned around, pointed a finger at D, and said, "Don't ever tell me what to do again. I don't care if you're a Vampire Hunter, I don't care how tough you are—the gloves *will* come off!"

THE DRIFTING DOMAIN

CHAPTER 7

I

There was fog early in the morning. The scenery just two or three yards away was enveloped in milky whiteness, so that nothing but outlines were visible. The mist was so heavy, it seemed like you'd hear the droplets fall if you brushed the grass or leaves.

As he pawed at his hair, which at some point had become drenched, Juke muttered in the driver's seat, "Hell, even rain would be better than this."

And saying this, he looked over at D, on his right. On horseback, Sergei ran along the left side of the wagon, while Gordo glared all around from atop the loading platform. Rosaria was in the living quarters.

"Thanks to you, no strange beasties have jumped us," Juke told the Hunter, "but without these cyborg horses and their keen memories, we'd have long since lost our way."

While there were a great many varieties of cyborg horse, they weren't that different from ordinary horses. But what transporters found indispensable when hauling cargo was a cyborg horse's innate ability to remember any road it'd traveled before. As these horses had been acquired out in the sticks, it was unavoidable that they weren't as durable or sophisticated as those from the Capital, but the crone who'd taken care of them assured the transporters their sensors were like new and the steeds were equipped with instinctive circuitry that could choose a path even where there was no road to speak of.

Actually, the horses had advanced unerringly even through the heavy fog, but in the last thirty minutes they'd begun to exhibit some strange behavior before finally halting completely.

"That hag sold us some lousy nags! Just you wait. On the return trip, I'm gonna give her a piece of my mind. What was all that talk about them being able to gallop at full speed through a moonless forest without so much as brushing a single leaf?"

As Juke gnashed his teeth, Sergei called over from beside him, "I wonder if it might be due to this fog? It's so heavy and strangely humid."

Turning his gaze to the left shoulder of his jacket, Juke looked at the analysis plaque that was sewn to it. It was a flat piece of wood covered with a strip of paper that assessed the makeup of the atmosphere.

"It's okay—it's just regular mist. No weird components to it."

"Then what's the deal?"

Juke gave him no reply, but looked at D. "Do you know?"

D said nothing as he took up the reins. The horses whinnied. The reins snapped into action, striking their necks. The horses advanced ever so slightly, then halted.

"They won't go even for *you*? Just what the hell's going on?" Juke said, tilting his head to one side as he looked at the animals. "What, is

there something scary up ahead? It couldn't seriously be worse than you—sorry, no offense intended. The freaking horses just don't look like they're spooked."

"They're bewildered," D said. "Because what's up ahead isn't where they were supposed to go."

"What do you mean by that?"

"There's no road."

"You've gotta be kidding me." Juke rubbed his eyes, adding, "I can't see it too well, but the road keeps right on going. From here it runs straight for the longest time, and even I know where it takes a turn."

"The horses don't know that."

"Huh?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sergei called out, disquieted.

"Can *you* go?" D asked.

"What? Sure."

Sergei cracked his reins. Then he gave a kick to his horse's belly. Twice he repeated each of those actions. His horse didn't move.

"What in the world?" Sergei muttered, but his words overlapped with a rustling in the forest.

The fog scattered in the wind, and Juke and Sergei turned their faces to avoid the gust. It soon abated. And as soon as they felt this happen, a hoarse voice declared, "A road's been made ready."

Turning their eyes forward and seeing the path that ran on through a break in the fog, Juke and Sergei looked at each other. Sure enough, there was the road that guided travelers to the village of Krakow.

Two hours later, the group arrived without incident at the stockade fence surrounding the village. In the lookout tower they saw a young man in a yellow shirt holding an old-fashioned gunpowder rifle.

"We're transporters," Juke called out.

Raising one hand, the man said, "Just a second." His tone was youthful but coarse. Perhaps moving over to the communications system, the young man stepped back and disappeared from the group's field of view.

A minute passed . . .

"He should be here by now. Why the hell hasn't he come over to check us out?" Gordo spat from the roof of the wagon.

Frontier villages never let visitors in without inspecting them first, especially in the case of things like wagons. They couldn't be sure there weren't robbers and bandits hiding in the vehicle to get at the wealth of the village.

Five minutes passed—and no one came. There wasn't even a sign of anybody on the other side of the gates.

"Weird," Juke said, eyeing the lookout tower.

"Hey, you up there!" he called out.

There was no answer. No one showed themselves.

After calling out repeatedly, Juke muttered in an entirely different

tone, “This is really weird. Did something happen?”

“What, in all of five minutes? The guy in the tower acted like everything was fine,” said Sergei. “Huh?”

D had climbed down from the wagon. Swiftly walking over to the great gates, he placed his left hand against one of them. For some reason, this gave the three men the creeps. D pulled his left hand away, and then took a big step back. Before he’d finished taking a second one, there was a silvery flash. The gates opened naturally.

Without waiting for the group, D pushed against the gates. As they opened easily right down the middle, the village came into view. Beneath the cloudy sky, quiet had settled over the houses and stands of trees.

“Weird,” Juke said, his eyes gleaming. “It’s midday, but there ain’t anyone here. I don’t even hear a single woman or kid.”

“What’ll we do?”

“Wait here,” D told them.

“Okay. Pardon us if we leave the checking to you, then. We can’t afford to let any harm come to this wagon.”

Before the man could finish speaking, D whistled softly. The cyborg horse tethered to the wagon tossed its head to free the lightly wrapped reins, and then galloped over to D. Getting into the saddle with a riveting grace, D rode through the gate without so much as a glance at the other men. The eight-inch-thick beam that’d barred the gate had been cleanly cut in two.

It wasn’t a terribly large village. At this hour, it should’ve been filled with people’s voices.

D headed straight for the square.

The scents of daytime filled the air. Fresh-baked bread, warm milk and coffee, fruit and vegetable juices, salted beef and pork steaks, the odor of vinegar in salad dressing, freshly ground pepper, white stew with a healthy dash of fennel—at the very least, the village had been alive a few minutes earlier.

To his rear, men and women talked, right behind his horse. D turned. There was no one there. Ahead, there was the laughter of children. He faced forward again—but there was nothing. There was no sign of anyone in the gardens or farmhouses he passed. Spades and sickles lay in the fields. White steam rose from lunchboxes left open . . . as if someone had just now opened them.

He was almost to the square when there was the sound of footsteps closing on him from behind. Restless panting became a voice that called out, “D!”

It was Rosaria racing over to him. “I waited for a chance—and then I ran off. I wanna see, too. I hate just waiting around to find out what’s going on.”

Grabbing the pommel, Rosaria was up on the horse’s back in no time. The steed didn’t seem to mind at all.

“Used to it, eh?” Rosaria muttered, wrapping her arms around D’s

waist exuberantly, as if it were something she'd always wanted to do.

They soon came to the square. Beneath a cloudy sky and without a single soul, the square had become perfectly still. Nothing was out of the ordinary, and there was no sign of anyone strange. There was simply no one and nothing there. They couldn't hear anything. But that in itself was most unsettling.

"Oh, my—I'm scared," Rosaria said, holding D tighter.

"I'm getting down," D said.

"What?"

"Listen closely to the town meeting hall."

That was the two-story building that stood to the right of the square. Rosaria closed her eyes, and then quickly opened them again.

"I hear people's voices! You mean to tell me everyone's hiding in there?"

Not answering her, D got off the horse. Rosaria followed suit. D made no move to help her, and Rosaria wanted no such help.

The door to the building wasn't locked. The instant D opened it—

"It stopped," Rosaria said, the phrase coming from her like a bursting soap bubble. But then she said, "Say, D."

D halted.

"I hear voices behind us. There are dozens of people. Talking, pulling wagons, drawing water. So, are they really there?"

"Look for yourself."

"I don't want to!"

Pushing the door open, D entered the meeting house. A dim light illuminated a hall filled with nothing but chairs—here was another empty building. Though the pair looked in every last room, they didn't encounter a single person.

"What happened to this village?" Rosaria asked in a somewhat unsettled tone.

And D responded with an odd question: "What was the name of this village?"

"It's Krakov, right?"

"It's Krakow."

"No, it's Krakov!"

Not disputing the matter any further, D stepped outside. The village that'd been filled with people ten or so minutes earlier was turning into a monument to chest-tightening horror that threatened to envelop the pair.

"It's not the same," Rosaria muttered behind D. From the sound of her voice, you could tell she had goose bumps. "This isn't the same square as before!"

II

When they reached the horse, D said, "Climb on in front."

"Huh? I—I'll ride in back of you."

"No, in front."

"Yessir."

Under the circumstances, she had no choice but to do as D said. As Rosaria straddled the front of the saddle, an arm in black that was like steel wrapped around her waist. In addition to surprise, Rosaria felt a slight excitement that she couldn't fight.

D raced back the same way they'd come.

"It certainly is odd," said a hoarse voice from the end of the arm wrapped around her waist, making Rosaria's body tense. "This is the village of Krakov, not Krakow. It's Krakov, yet it's also Krakow."

"Hmm—then it's just as I thought," D said in a low voice, which Rosaria heard through a blissful haze.

"It was on that chip. The Sacred Ancestor gave Gaskell the right to take all his neighboring lands. But there was a condition. The total area of his territory was fixed—in other words, all he could do was shift his domain wherever he liked. People tried to flee the accursed lands, but that became impossible."

"That would mean he—" Rosaria began, her own voice sounding distant.

"He's come back to life." It was the same thing the hoarse voice had said.

"Why?"

"Ask him."

"Maybe I will."

Just when her tone had apparently grown serious, D turned his back to her.

From beyond the palisade that encircled the village, a number of black streaks came flying, painting huge arcs against the backdrop of the sky. Having taken a kick to its belly, the horse galloped like mad. There was the sound of something flying overhead . . . and dropping toward them!

D's blade carved a horizontal path above her head. Rosaria heard a strange sound as the merciless slash cut the air.

"Wh-what was that just now, D?"

About a foot from the end of the terrified girl's nose was a jutting black tree branch. The branch was a weapon.

It was a common ploy—the average sorcerer could turn a tree into an attacker easily enough. However, Rosaria was shocked when she realized the branch had come flying from beyond the palisade. And the fence wasn't protecting a small fort, but rather the entire area that several hundred people called home. In the narrowest part, the community still had to be at least two miles across. Tree branches were striking at them from thousands of yards away.

When would the next attack come?

The gates came into view.

"Yippee!" the girl exclaimed unconsciously. "Once we're through there, we'll be safe!"

"Oh, really?"

"*What?* You little—" Rosaria said, latching onto D's left fist.

At that moment, a tremendous impact struck them—D had activated the boosters. Almost simultaneously, the cyborg horse spun around, dispelling the shock stream. Rosaria held onto D's arm for all she was worth. Surprisingly enough, she didn't scream. The steely arm wound about her waist lent her support.

Turning his steed once again to the right, D spotted an obstacle lying across the road. It was a black coffin. Could D halt his steed?

Rather than leap over it, he chose to stop. Forestalled by an ordinary black coffin. Who was inside?

There was a rasping noise. The sound of hinges. With a peerlessly stern gaze trained on it from high in the saddle, the lid of the coffin slowly opened.

There wasn't just one coffin. The inky black space was vast, unfathomable, and occupied by black shapes.

"Open up, everyone."

If the room belonged to anyone, it might've been gloom itself. At some point, a figure in black suddenly stood in the middle of the room—or rather, at the center of the coffins. Although it seemed impossible, his head reached as high as the unseen ceiling, and his shoulders were so broad they stretched to the unseen walls. The darkness seemed like an air that seeped from every inch of him.

"One of the coffins I sent is impeding him," said the figure in black.

Who was there to hear him? The dead in their coffins?

In their midst, he continued to speak stoically, saying, "I don't know how formidable this stripling may be, but it was insolent of him to run off with a woman I'd taken as my own. The occupant of that coffin is the least impressive of all those summoned to my domain. If that is enough to stop him, then, dhampir or not, he is nothing great. Or so I would assume."

Other voices agreed with the first.

"Indeed, milord!"

"Indeed, milord!"

"Indeed, milord!"

Those cries echoed from every coffin surrounding the figure in black.

"Here I am, back among the living. So, what shall I do now? No, I know this, thanks to the memories bestowed on me by the Sacred Ancestor when I escaped my humiliating death. Well then, off I go. Off to claim that young lady for my clan. You should all take up your posts and wait once the sun has set."

His black cape billowed out as he began to walk off. Solid as a wall, light as a breeze. As he climbed a spiral staircase that was like a vortex through the darkness, no one heard him mutter, "But why take the girl?"

Darkness filled the interior of the coffin.

There were Nobles who could walk about in cloudy weather. Although it wasn't an astounding phenomenon, Rosaria's heart was pounding like a steam piston going full blast.

Giving a final creak, the lid finished opening, and darkness like black water choked the coffin right up to the brim. Perhaps the corpse inside it had died by drowning. A shadow packed the occupant's lungs and belly.

The darkness rose. Moving its head slowly, its movements weren't those of a dead person who'd been given life, but rather those of a corpse merely imitating life. The darkness didn't spill out. Instead, it hid its occupant like a robe as he or she rose from the coffin and stepped out onto the ground. Inside, it was still night. The Hunter's foe was concealed within that night.

"Is that one of the general's tricks?" D asked.

Light flashed out, for a sharp blade had erupted from the lower part of the darkness—approximately where the knee would be on a human being. It was about to sever the legs of the cyborg horse D was riding, and then double back for another swipe that would bisect its torso. It slashed—through empty space.

D was in midair, horse and all. A split second before the blade sprang from the darkness, he'd made his steed leap with but a single tug on the reins. However, his mount hadn't taken even a step back, so the movement was impossible to predict. A gleam zipped after the Hunter. In midair it clashed against D's sword, ringing out with the most glorious sound and giving off sparks before it bounced back.

The darkness didn't move. The cyborg horse landed to its rear—if that was even the proper way to describe it—and D flew down from his mount like a black wind.

"Go!" he said, striking the horse on its hindquarters and sending it racing for the gates.

Fifteen feet separated him from the darkness. At this distance, one of them would have to take a leap before either could make an effective strike.

The gleam of light grew longer. Just as it looked as if it would go straight into the left side of the Hunter's chest, another streak zipped at the right side of his neck.

Effortlessly deflecting the attacks, D kicked off the ground. Made without a sound, the leap seemed to surpass even stillness. Perhaps enthralled by the beauty of it, the darkness—or the person within the darkness—was motionless, as if paralyzed. Like an angry wave crashing home, D's blade slashed down through it from the top of its head all the way to the crotch. Bright blood exploded like fireworks.

D leapt away. The silver blade that pierced him through the solar plexus and out through the back stuck with him like a curse, stretching to match his movements.

D's deadly swipe had met with no resistance at all, as if he'd split the darkness itself, but the blade that'd shot from the darkness at the very same

instant had dealt him a lethal wound. D retreated, and the blade followed him further still. It twisted wildly, making D convulse. A new blade followed after it. D's sword met it in midair, locking together with it and stopping it cold.

"Here comes number three!" the hoarse voice said.

Undoubtedly this one was intended to remove D's head.

Making a bizarre sound, the flash of light stopped by D's shoulder. The tip of the blade had gone into the palm of his left hand . . . and into the tiny mouth of the little face that'd popped up on it. Teeth like grains of rice had locked onto the blade. Now D had no way left to defend himself.

"Number four," the voice declared.

As the gleam shot right at him, D moved his head, narrowly avoiding it. A fog of blood erupted from his right cheek.

The darkness disgorged its flashing coup de grâce. D made a great spin of his body. All of the dark one's swords snapped in two, with one of them deflecting the blade headed straight for the Hunter.

As D turned to face the dark one once more, it saw that fresh blood streamed from his cheek to his lips—and for the first time, the surface of the darkness was visibly disturbed. Licking at the blood around his mouth, stark white fangs poking from his lips, D pulled the blade from his abdomen and hurled it at the darkness. D wasn't the same person he'd been as the blade he hurled pierced the darkness and left it standing still.

A cry of agony that transcended speech rang through the air, and the dark one staggered. As soon as the shadowy figure collapsed into its coffin, the lid shut. A needle of rough wood pierced the top as it grew clear as glass, leaving the missile stuck in the ground.

"Gaskell's giving it help, eh?" the hoarse voice groaned. "But he won't raise a hand against you. Of course, that's a trick he was given by the Sacred Ancestor. But why would he come back to life now? After all, there was nothing on that chip but the program for reviving him."

Just then, they heard the sound of hoofbeats from two steeds approaching from the rear. It was Juke and Sergei.

As the pair got off their horses and approached him, D told them, "Keep away." Like the edge of the wind, D's voice made them stop. His back still to them, he wiped his lips with the back of his left hand. Whether or not the pair knew the reason why he'd stopped them, they halted.

"You all right?" they asked, but as soon as they spoke, they noticed the fresh blood splattered on the ground.

"Are you okay?"

"More or less."

On hearing this, there really wasn't anything else to say.

"Okay," Juke said with a nod. "What about Rosaria?"

"She didn't come back?" D asked, still facing the other way.

"No. All that came back was your horse."

"She vanished. The same thing with the guy from the lookout tower.

Everyone in the village did, I bet," Sergei muttered uneasily as he surveyed their surroundings.

"There's something funny about this, D," Juke said, rubbing his left bicep with his right hand. The face of the stouthearted Frontier man was pale with naked fear. "Actually, I can recall visiting this village a number of times—but it's different. This isn't Krakow."

"No, Juke—it's the village of Krakov," Sergei corrected him, suddenly adding, "Fog again."

Arising from no distinct source, a silky white gauze was beginning to shroud the world. In it, the familiar houses looked the same as always and completely different at the same time.

"This is General Gaskell's domain," D said.

"It can't be—"

"We checked the maps and everything!"

The voices of both men crumbled before they reached D's back.

D was no longer looking the other way; he was gazing straight ahead. Into the far reaches of the fog—and the castle that loomed on the side of a rocky mountain that hadn't existed up until now, jagged as the back of a fire dragon. There was no cause for surprise. After all, this was the domain of General Gaskell. Deep within the haze, devoid of an iota of beauty, towered the foreboding fortress that was Castle Gaskell—the stronghold of a vampire lord second only to the Sacred Ancestor.

Dark Road

PART TWO

A REPORT FROM THE DEMON CASTLE

CHAPTER 1

I

The ash gray clouds piled up so heavy and low they nearly touched the ground, and from time to time the purple luminescence became a thin thread stitching heaven and earth together. And each time it did, a section of the ether glowed faintly, the light fading in hue as it spread in the distance, and then vanishing again in no time. Then another section did the same. This time closer.

The light beyond the window gave General Gaskell's face the pale glow of a saint's.

Turning, Gaskell said, "Welcome. I've been waiting for you."

Luxurious was the only way to describe the reception hall, where no expense had been spared. If an artist or archaeologist from the Capital could see it, they'd cling to the intricate wall carvings and never let go for as long as they lived.

"Such was the agreement. I'm ever so grateful to have been brought back to life," Baron Schuma said, his tone somewhat sarcastic as he raised the wineglass he held. "So, have the others arrived yet?"

"They're all here. You, sir, are the last of my guests."

"My apologies. So, when is the party where you introduce us all?"

"There won't be one."

"Excuse me?"

"You're fond of parties, are you?"

"Why, yes."

The baron's crestfallen reply brought a grin from the general.

Baron Schuma wanted to gasp aloud, but he desperately fought it back. When he first saw the general, his height and the breadth of his shoulders had seemed mountainous, but now he was normal size. But as a result, his impact had increased a hundredfold. On the right half of his face was a mask of silvery steel. While battling an expeditionary force from the Capital, he'd become too enamored of the slaughter and failed to notice the coming of dawn, and as a result half of his face was exposed to light shining from between the clouds. Though there was no choice but to read his atrocious nature from the remaining half of his countenance, there was no need to even observe that for long. Just a glance made it perfectly clear. His sharply rising eyes brimmed with malevolence, his nose was curved like an eagle's beak, and the lips below it were so thick they looked like they alone would be enough to gnaw through bone. The occasionally glimpsed fangs seemed to have enough force to stop a monster in its tracks.

"My esteemed guests won't be meeting face to face as long as you are in my castle, or even after your goal has been achieved."

"Why is that?"

"Because there is nothing I loathe so much as a conspiracy."

The baron's lips formed a grin of surprise—and irony.

Whether the general noticed that or not, he continued in the same fierce tone, “All of you have been revived and have come here due to promises made in life. Your power must be focused against our foe. However, once that’s been done, what proof do I have that all of you won’t join forces?”

“For what?”

“To destroy me and take my territory and my power.”

“But that’s—”

“Don’t tell me that’s wild speculation, Baron,” the general said, his lips twisting to leave his fangs exposed. It would’ve been enough to give a child a heart attack.

Spinning his black cape around, he stretched his right hand toward the window. Lightning flashed again.

“Where did it fall this time? Most likely near the Hunter called D. That’s probably where he is.”

“He’s something else,” the baron said, his expression growing serious. For he had squared off against D.

“There are seven Nobles to face him—that is no small number. Each is exceptionally powerful. And all of them have their sights set on my life, my position, and my property. Don’t look so surprised. If they weren’t so vicious, they’d be of no use to me.”

“Well, you may have something there,” the baron conceded. “But that would mean we’ll have to go against D one at a time.”

“Precisely.”

“Forgive me for asking, but has the general ever done battle with that young man?”

“No.”

“I thought not,” Schuma said, and as he nodded his head, his cold eyes never left Gaskell, piercing him. Before the general could say anything, the baron raised one hand and said, “I know what you’re going to tell me. However, all I wish to say is that having crossed steel with him once gives you an entirely different perspective. If you could sense the will he shows to slaughter, or better yet feel even the breeze off his blade with your fingertips, General, I believe your preconceptions would be wiped clean. If you are truly intent upon destroying him, you should have all of those you’ve summoned to your castle working in concert. Even then, I don’t know whether he would be defeated or not.”

Although the Nobleman thought an objection would hit him like the blast from a bomb, the general fell silent. He then quickly donned a wry grin and stared at the baron. Something cold crept up the baron’s neck.

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. Indeed, I have no way of knowing precisely how strong our foe is.”

“This is exactly what I would expect from General Gaskell,” the baron said, but as he bowed respectfully, his heart was filled with fear of his host.

Outside the window, lightning flashed again.

“So, the rain came with the thirtieth, eh? Well, it’s dangerous, but there’s not much we can do about that,” Juke said, his words surviving the roar of the fierce downpour to reach the other two in the tent.

Thirty was the number of times lightning had struck.

The tent that’d been pitched beside the wagon—which was easily spacious enough to accommodate ten or more people—was of the very latest style, and it set itself up at the pull of a single cord.

“This is a hell of a situation, isn’t it? What’s this ‘drifting domain’ D’s been talking about?”

In reply to Sergei’s question, Gordo said, “I suppose it means his territory can move to and fro. So we strayed into his domain without even knowing it.”

“Then you mean to tell me we can’t get out again? No matter how far we run, his territory will move after us!”

“We’ll leave that matter to D.”

At Gordo’s reply, the eyes of all focused on the tent’s still-open door—D had gone outside to check the area around the tent. As if in response, they heard another sound echoing out beyond the noisy patter of the rain. Footsteps.

“The wire net’s been strung,” Juke said, his voice tense. “Got juice flowing through it, too. See, that’s what D said to do.”

“Those footsteps—they’re not D’s!” Gordo said, pulling the gun by his side a little closer. The click of the safety releasing rang out unpleasantly loud.

“Yeah. There’s more than one of ’em.”

As Sergei got to his feet, he carried a bulbous flamethrower in his right hand.

The group closed up the fronts of the plastic raincoats they wore and put up the hoods. Covering them up past the mouth, the suits had pressurized gas cylinders built in to supply them with oxygen. These coats were indispensable when faced with creatures that gave off radiation, or when passing through areas choked with poisonous gases.

“Here we go!”

Juke was the first one out, followed by Gordo. Sergei remained in the tent.

As soon as they stepped outside, Juke and Gordo noticed blurry figures off in the rain. There were three of them—and they were staggering closer. Women clad in rags.

Juke tried to draw up a list in his head of all the supernatural creatures that might appear on their route across the Frontier, and then stopped himself. This was General Gaskell’s domain. Everything he knew no longer applied.

“Halt!” Juke shouted when the women had come to within twenty or so feet of them.

“What’ll we do?” Gordo muttered softly.

“At any rate—halt!”

At Juke’s shout, the women stopped cold.

“Who are you?” Juke asked, drawing a bead on the second and largest of the women. From the air about her, he took it she was their leader.

“Help us!” the foremost woman cried, reaching out with both arms. Waterlogged as she was, the gesture seemed somewhat calculated.

“Sure, we’ll help you all right. Once you’ve been straight with us, that is.”

“We were locked up in that castle—Castle Gaskell. A lot of our friends are still there.”

“Why didn’t they come with you?”

“They can’t move. They’ve all been bitten.”

And as soon as she spoke, the woman swooned. All of the feelings she’d repressed had burst free at once, and the physical and psychological balance she’d barely managed to maintain collapsed completely.

“Okay—show us your throats. We don’t have any proof you girls haven’t been bitten.”

The other two brushed away the hair that clung to their skin and turned first one side of their necks and then the other to the men. The pale flesh of both was free from injury.

“Okay, you check out,” Gordo said with apparent relish. Though he didn’t know exactly who these ladies were, they were young, curvaceous, and particularly attractive, which was wonderful since they didn’t have the mark of the vampire.

“Now, come right in! Don’t be shy!” Gordo told them in a leisurely manner in keeping with his nature.

Not surprisingly, Juke ordered him, “Check out the neck of the one that fell, too.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right,” Gordo said, quickly going over to the young woman for a look at her throat. “No freaking wounds. She’s okay, I—”

But even with these words, Juke’s expression lost none of its hardness.

“These are dangerous times. It’s easy enough to hypnotize yourself so you’ll have amnesia or take on a different personality. I’ve even heard you can make fang marks disappear,” he said.

“Then what should we do?” asked Gordo.

Still inside the tent, Sergei hadn’t made a move.

“There’s only one way to find out for sure if someone’s a vampire. And it’s easy, at that.”

“How do you do it?”

“With this!”

Juke’s hand flashed down to his belt, and a second later he pulled out something deep red. A crimson rose.

The women looked at each other.

“This is the result of the latest research in the Capital. It’s just an ordinary flower that blooms all over the place, but if anyone with Noble blood touches it, it’s supposed to wilt in seconds.”

Bending over the fallen woman, Juke set the flower down on the nape of her neck.

II

Thunder rang out in the distance.

It couldn't have taken even three seconds for the crimson petals to lose their hue and wither away.

In his hand, Juke gripped a steel knife with a blade more than a foot long. As he bent over once more, he used the motion to bring down the knife at the same time.

The pale hand that shot up from below caught hold of his wrist—it was the young lady, who'd flipped over faster than the eye could follow. Her slanting eyes gave off a malevolent blood light, a pair of fangs protruded from her vermilion lips . . . and her pretty face had become that of a veritable demon.

Agony twisted Juke's features, and from the wrist up the limb she clutched turned a deep purple.

If you get into a fight with a Noble, run. Failing that, don't let them catch you—this saying was a perfect testimony to the brute strength they possessed. They could tear the limbs off a human in the span of a breath.

"Juke!"

"Keep your eyes on the women!" Juke yelled back, swinging the gunpowder rifle in his left hand toward his own right hand.

A roar shook the heavens, and an orange gout of flame blew away the right hand—of the woman.

Juke took a massive leap back, the gun in his left hand bellowing once more. The woman had bounded as if the pain of her right hand meant nothing, but then her head blew apart, scattering contents the same hue as those of a watermelon.

Wielding a rifle with a serious kick with just his left hand and still hitting her square in the head would've been a difficult feat for even an expert marksman. Juke must've trained till his hands bled.

"How about those two?" Juke said, his expression distorted by pain as he brought his gun to bear on the remaining women.

"Can't say—but it looks like they're okay," Gordo replied.

"Come here. Scratch that—Sergei!" Juke called out, his eyes trained all the while on the women who looked frozen with fright.

Poking his head from the tent, Sergei too had a gun pointed at the visitors. Having read the situation from inside the tent was quite an accomplishment.

"Don't take your eyes off these women. Gordo, there are some red capsules in the pouch on the back of my belt. Right near the middle. Take two and crack 'em open with your nails."

Gordo swiftly went behind the other man and opened the flap on the pouch on his belt—it was crammed full of capsules and glass ampoules

large and small. He soon located the crimson capsules. Pressing his finger down on one end of them, he pulled. Each capsule was transformed into a crimson rose. Apparently they'd undergone some manner of compression.

Without a word, Gordo threw them at the two women. Both struck them near the waist before falling. And as they fell, they decayed.

Baring their fangs, the woman attacked. Three guns belched fire. With blood streaming from where their heads had been, the women's bodies dropped in the grass. The verdure changed to vermilion.

"Wonder if they can come back?" Gordo said.

"Their heads were taken off. Look at that!" Sergei said, pointing to where the women's corpses were collapsing in on themselves.

"That'll work!" he declared with a nod before adding, "Hey, Juke—what do you wanna do?"

But when Gordo turned to look, the other man's eyes were lower than he'd expected. He raced over to Juke, who was now on his knees.

"What's wrong?"

"My hand—"

Juke's right hand was black and swollen. The cause was immediately apparent. The fingers of another hand were digging into his wrist—those of the woman's severed limb.

"Goddamn freak!" Gordo spat, pulling the machete from his boot. With movements far more meticulous than would be expected from such a crude weapon, he chopped off the woman's fingers. Though the hand fell to the ground, the fingers wouldn't let go.

"She's a persistent bitch, ain't she?" Gordo said, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Would you let me handle this?" Sergei said, having silently observed the situation up until now. He had a look in his eyes like he was watching something freakish.

"Is there anything that can be done?"

"I read something in a book. This is what they call 'the nails of the dead.' Once they dig into someone, they won't let go until that person's dead."

"Can't we try something?" Juke asked this time. His complexion was nearly ashen.

"Yeah. I don't have time to explain, though. Will you leave it to me?"

"Good enough."

"Hey, wouldn't it just be quicker to cut his arm off?" Gordo asked, leaning forward. It might've sounded absurd, but the code of the Frontier said that losing an arm was preferable to dying.

Juke looked up at Sergei. "How about it?"

"If all goes well, we can get through this without taking your arm off," Sergei replied, but his expression seemed somewhat lacking in confidence.

"Okay, then it's in your hands," Juke said flatly.

"Hey, are you sure about this?" Gordo said, eyes bulging.

Ignoring him, Juke said, "You always have been the scholarly one,

haven't you? I don't know if you're cut out for doctoring, but do what you can. Don't leave me with one arm."

"Understood. Just relax," Sergei told him, his chest puffing. Now he was ready, too.

It was just after they'd carried Juke into the tent that D came back. Sergei explained the situation.

"Good enough," D said, deciding to stand back and watch what could only be described as a questionable operation.

"D—you've gotta know something about these 'nails of the dead,' too. From what I've seen, this guy's a complete piker. I haven't a clue whether trusting him to do this is the right thing to do or not. Tell me what to do."

"My job is finding and killing Nobles."

Perhaps he simply meant Juke's operation neither impacted nor interested him.

"Oh, you're a cold one," Gordo grumbled roughly.

"That's only right," Juke called out, as if to soothe his colleague from where he was strapped down to the table. "Just you wait and see. Hell, I'll be better in no time. I've got a good doctor here."

And after he'd spoken he inquired, "Is this Gaskell's territory after all?"

"That's right," D said.

"So the area will be crawling with monsters he released. Damn it all!" Gordo said, slapping his gun.

But Sergei told him, "No, actually there should hardly be any."

"How come?" Gordo snarled.

"He's right," D said softly. "Gaskell hated monsters. It seems that when creatures the other Nobles had spawned wandered into his territory, he slew them mercilessly, and then sent their remains back to their masters. The reason his battle against the Capital was such a lonely one was because he had no allies."

"What a piece of work. So, you mean to tell me there were some who were even hated by their fellow Nobles?" Gordo said, tilting his head to one side.

The general consensus was that the Nobility had prided itself on a monolithic unity.

"But just now—" Gordo began, going on to relate the tale of the vampire women.

"If they were humanoid in shape, that was a different matter. Especially if they were female."

"Say what? So, you mean to tell me he's just a horny bastard?"

"Could be," D said. Because it came in his usual tone, Gordo and Sergei couldn't hold in their laughter, and even Juke grinned wryly on the table.

"No, it's a fact," Sergei said as he began laying the contents of his own personal medical kit out on the table. "The more you look at General Gaskell, the more you see what a unique individual he was. Actually, when

they take a survey of those studying the ancient Nobility, he always comes in second for 'Noble of interest,' with third place not even coming close. And that's not all. In the category of 'Noble you'd most like to meet' he also comes in second every time. Incidentally, there isn't even a third place for that one. No one even wants to see any other Nobility."

"Second place with a bullet, eh? Who got first?" Juke inquired in a low tone. It was immediately apparent he was fighting back pain.

Trying to keep his own expression from looking strained, Sergei answered, "The Sacred Ancestor in both cases."

Seeming to accept that, Juke said, "I might've known. But he went to war with the Capital, which acted on the Sacred Ancestor's will. Were they on bad terms or something?"

"No, every book on the subject says they were amicable."

"Then those worthless books belong in the trash," Gordo spat.

Just then, an unpleasant sound escaped Juke's throat and his entire body went into convulsions.

"Damn—'the poison of the dead' has reached his heart. It's going too fast," Sergei said, worrying his lip.

"Do something, you damn quack. If not, I'm gonna—"

"Shut up!" Sergei shouted, his eyes closed. Quickly opening them, he pulled two bottles out of his medicine case, took a high-pressure injector out of the autoclave, and filled it with liquid from both bottles. The swift and steady movements of his hands left Gordo gazing at his profile in amazement. Without even a momentary pause Sergei pressed the tip of a drug-filled syringe into the vein in Juke's left arm, and less than two seconds after the high-pressure piston went into action the agony drained from the man's face. His sharp, shallow breaths quickly returned to normal.

Bringing away the hand that'd been checking the man's pulse, Sergei let out a deep breath and said, "That should hold him for the time being." Apparently the breath wasn't one of relief. "However, since it's reached his heart, there's nothing more I can do for him. So—"

As his colleague was about to sink into a sea of his own distress, Gordo hurled his rage at him like a boulder. "Then wouldn't we have been better off taking his arm off from the start? *Well?*"

Sergei gave a firm shake of his head. "At that point, it wouldn't have mattered. But the poison spreading that fast—that was my mistake."

"If we could all get away with calling everything a mistake, we wouldn't need lawmen!" Gordo said, recalling an old saying. "So, what did you plan on doing? We lose even one man now and we'll be in a world of trouble. There's a ton of folks out there waiting for us to deliver our goods."

"There *is* a way," said Sergei.

"Oh, really?"

"There's a kind of herb that has the same components as the antidote for the poison of the dead. If we could get hold of some—but at this rate, Juke might only last a day."

"Where is it? Smack dab in the middle of the garden at Gaskell's castle?"

"It's in the middle of the inner courtyard at Gaskell's castle."

Gordo's eyes bugged out.

"Sorry, but you two will have to look after Juke. I'll go get it," said Sergei.

"Oh, my!" a voice from the vicinity of D's left hand exclaimed, but no one noticed.

"Are you an idiot or something? Just how in the hell do you plan on tackling the second most popular Noble? You're not a reporter from the Capital going up there for an interview, you know!"

"I'll think of something along the way, I suppose."

"You'll just lose another man," D said, his words drawing the eyes of both men.

"But at this rate—"

"Rosaria's also at Gaskell's castle. If I get the herb for the antidote and destroy Gaskell, that'll be the end of all of this."

"Uh, I suppose so," Gordo conceded with a reluctant nod.

"Hire me."

"What?"

Though the turbaned man was astonished, Sergei's face was suffused with joy. "That's right—we've got D here. The greatest Vampire Hunter on the whole Frontier!"

"Damn straight," said the feeble voice that drifted off the table.

"Juke?"

Juke still wore an intense expression on his face as he said, "You gotta . . . save the girl . . . and me, too . . . I'm begging you . . . In payment . . . I'll give you my full wages from this run . . . How about it?"

"Make it the wages for all three of you," a hoarse voice demanded.

The eyes of the other two went wide, but they responded soon enough.

"Hell, you got it."

"We're counting on you, D!"

And having been invested with their full trust, the Hunter said, "I've got one whole day, till noon tomorrow—but you two may have the harder part of this."

The sound of rain mixed with D's words.

III

Because many of the Nobility's castles were based on those from Europe in the Middle Ages, the lay of the land and placement of the defenses could largely be determined by reading old plans and picture scrolls. During the millennia-spanning Human-Noble War, the human side had been served best during its daytime assaults by three-dimensional schematics created by analyzing those medieval strongholds. Years later, they were printed in a cheap paperback edition and distributed across the whole Frontier, and D

kept a copy of this volume in his saddlebags.

Soon after he'd left the tent the rain had abated, but flashes of lightning occasionally lent the leaden sky a bluish tint.

When he took the book out and was about to flip through its pages, the hoarse voice needled him, saying, "Gaskell's castle ain't in there. That's one strange man, all right. Never attended any gatherings of the Nobility, never called any either, just kept above it all. Maybe that was why the Sacred Ancestor took a shine to him. Gaskell's eccentric behavior was most likely the Sacred Ancestor's—"

As if to cut short a long-winded discourse, D asked, "How do we get in?"

Even without blueprints, the source of the hoarse voice apparently knew something.

The answer came quickly: "It's no use. Its defenses were tight as a drum. No doubt they still are."

Saying nothing, D tugged on the reins. His cyborg horse advanced through a bottleneck in the rocky mountains.

"So, you're going right up to the front door after all? You're a reckless cuss. That's precisely what Gaskell wants!"

However, contrary to the left hand's expectations, not a single attack came from the mountain fortress that loomed beneath the dark clouds. Had the general not taken notice, or was he simply going to draw them inside before tearing into them?

Through a world of thunder and lightning that would give pause even to one possessing greater-than-average courage, a young man of unearthly beauty rode in silence on his steed. The road remained a shabby, rock-strewn mess, but the way the Hunter handled his mount, he'd undoubtedly reach the castle in a quarter of the usual time—or in about two hours.

The interior of the castle was swimming in unrest. D's approach was being transmitted via countless holographs and three-dimensional monitors to the guests who'd been called there that day.

"Oh, how beautiful!"

"Who'd believe he was a Hunter?"

While some innocently expressed their admiration, others expressed more violent views.

"He came to us all alone? This stripling is far too overconfident. I need no assistance. I shall tear him to ribbons and feed his entrails to the crows!"

Not surprisingly, in all of the conversations no one remained a voice of moderation, though one person did suggest, "Shall I go out and test him a bit before he arrives here?"

"Grand Duke Mehmet?" General Gaskell responded.

"Correct, milord. Why, this stripling has no more to offer than his good looks—though he is truly gorgeous. The very notion of him being a Hunter is ridiculous. He may be good, but he can't be any more than a young upstart who's slain two or three bumpkin Nobility. Once I've torn off one of

his arms, he's bound to scamper away with his tail between his legs."

"I hope so, but that's the same man who bested Major General Gillis."

That was the name of the person in the darkness who'd fled from his battle with D.

"Well, that was Gillis. I, Mehmet, won't allow such a shocking spectacle to be made of myself. I should like your permission to go toy with him a bit. Thanks to you, General, we're able to walk in the sunlight, but the Noble blood that courses through him should leave him reluctant to do battle by day."

"It isn't my power that allows you to walk in the light of day," the general spat. "But by the look of things, it is the power of his own blood that allows him to do so. Grand Duke Mehmet, wait here patiently for his arrival. Though he's hardly a match for you, there's no need to get flustered about this. He's a strange young man."

Grand Duke Mehmet didn't conceal the snicker in his voice as he said, "The great General Gaskell. Was it only two centuries ago that we trembled at your reputation?"

"General," a different voice called out. That of a woman . . . and surely she was lovely and young. A heavenly beauty. "Allow Grand Duke Mehmet to go."

Her voice, which had what some might call a supple ring to it, hinted at thorns that would make anyone's eyes go wide.

"Madame Laurencin, is it?" General Gaskell said, his voice carrying a trace of fear. "I don't know about that."

"General, you couldn't possibly be afraid of that young man, could you?" Madame Laurencin said, her voice carrying cool laughter.

"Don't be ridiculous. In my lifetime, there was no end to the number of fools who tried to get into this castle and take my head. Although I spotted all of them well before the fact, I never let any of them be killed before they reached the castle. Each and every one was invited into the forecourt, where they were treated to my own special brand of hospitality. Not one of them made it in any further. That is the way I do things. And I will hear no objections to it."

His declaration was firm. Every one of the voices opted for silence.

After confirming as much, the general said, "Madame Laurencin, I have a request for you, my good lady."

"Oh, me? It's an honor, milord. Simply say the word," she replied in a voice that made it easy to picture how lovely she'd look with the hem of her dress spreading across the floor like the tail of a peacock.

"I've abducted a certain young lady. One of those whom the lowly humans refer to as a *victim*. I should like you to take charge of her."

"Why do you ask this, milord?"

"The fact of the matter is, I myself don't fully understand why it is that I took the girl."

This conversation was of the utmost secrecy and didn't reach the ears of anyone aside from the two of them.

"You told me yourself but a few hours ago that you would make her an addition to your clan, General."

"My intent was to make her an addition—it would seem."

Madame Laurencin's voice fell silent for a while. "So, you brought her to this castle without even knowing why?" she finally asked.

"At first, I thought it was to restrict D's movements. However, it seems that such is not the case."

"It *seems*? General, do you not understand the reason for your own actions?"

"Actually, yes."

The Noblewoman was at a loss for words.

"I say this to you alone, milady. Why was I brought back to life?"

Silence descended on a universe of amazement. The general had just stated quite plainly that all of his actions were guided by memories the Sacred Ancestor had imparted to him.

"There's only one reason that I know of at present."

"What might that be?" After a brief pause, the Noblewoman continued, "How incredible. Could he really be so formidable?" Her amazement was tinged with just a hint of rapture.

There was no need for D to halt his horse when he reached the castle gates. Studded with black hobnails, the great iron doors made an unspoken threat that things would only get worse as they split down the middle and swung open. Not hesitating in the slightest, D rode in.

"Impressive," said the female voice that rang out as the gates shut themselves behind D and the Hunter continued on into the center of the forecourt garden.

While no expense had been spared, there wasn't a trace of the medieval castle garden that had served as its model. Enormous trees had merely been planted haphazardly, turf had been laid, and a cobblestone path put through it, giving it a certain bluntness. It was clear at a glance: This was the castle of a soldier. More than anything, what caught the viewer's eye were the fanglike castle walls, the countless arrow slits and loopholes for guns, the prism sights of heat rays concealed in innocuous-looking statues of beasts, and the murderous intent of wind-pressure sensors standing in a far-too-insistent gale.

"My name is Madame Laurencin. I'm one of those who were called here," she said, her voice like a blossom—a blossom made of ice. "General Gaskell intended to meet you himself, but I managed to coax him into allowing me a taste of you first. Therefore, if you wish to go any further, you shall have to slay me first. The young lady you seek is in my custody."

"Where is she?" D asked as he looked up at the sky, which had begun to take on a richer blue.

"On the top floor of the eastern tower—for what it's worth. Getting to those stairs will prove no easy task. Not the sort of thing a lowly Hunter of Nobility could achieve as long as he lived."

Saying nothing, D continued forward. Here and there he spied the paths that led from the spacious forecourt to the various gardens in different parts of the castle.

"This was all for naught," Madame Laurencin sneered. "Lasers, strike him down."

Murderous intent coalesced in the devices in the forecourt.

D advanced mutely. The blue pendant on his chest was giving off a dazzling light.

“What’s wrong? Shoot him!” the Noblewoman cried, her voice full of surprise and anger. But it quickly became a spiteful laugh. “It would seem our machines are malfunctioning. In that case, how does this suit you?”

Suddenly, the scene in the forecourt shifted. The location of the trees and path remained the same, but everything was tinged vermilion. The ground and the castle walls were all coated with fresh blood—in fact, the ground couldn’t even be seen. Mounds of countless corpses filled D’s surroundings. The remains were those of fallen soldiers wearing helmets and armor and carrying longswords and chemical pistols. How many days had passed since the lifeblood had flowed from those bodies with their chests gouged, throats split, or heads torn off?

A maddening stench filled the forecourt. Those corpses at the bottom of the heap had already putrefied, the eyeballs rolling out on strings of goo and insects working the flesh free from the bones—it seemed that even the blue sky overhead would be corrupted by this rank scene, with its foul miasma and eye-watering stink.

But there were still some who would describe this tableau as beautiful, due solely to the presence of the young man in black astride his steed. All the ugliness and brutality of death was erased by D’s good looks. Before this young man, would death itself not blush?

The dead and their blood began to lose their color unexpectedly. As they lost their shape and hue, the stone walls and sculptures of the present became visible right through them, and in no time the scene was that of the garden where D had started.

“You possess a mysterious power,” Madame Laurencin remarked. This time her tone was much livelier and the direction was clear.

D’s face rose slightly. Thirty feet remained until the gate leading to the central courtyard. Atop the gatehouse, a lovely woman in a long white gown was looking down at him. Naturally, her visage was elegantly beautiful, but her skin in particular was every bit as stark white and smooth as her dress. Between fingers wrapped in long white gloves, a delicate pipe crafted from ivory let off swirls of purplish tobacco smoke.

“I am Madame Laurencin. And you are—D.”

From the black-gloved hand that gripped the reins, a voice whispered, “This Noblewoman was destroyed three thousand years ago! How interesting. She was so wicked and cruel, the Sacred Ancestor himself presided over her trial before carving her heart out. Looks like nothing but rebels have gathered here.”

“It would seem that the source of your power lies in that pendant and your left hand,” the woman said, grinning as if she’d found him out. From between her vermilion lips, there poked a pair of pearly fangs.

SHADOW OF THE SACRED ANCESTOR

CHAPTER 2

I

D lowered his eyes as if the woman didn't interest him at all. *Not an ugly hag like you.*

Perhaps this was how Madame Laurencin took it, because her demeanor changed. Her long pipe turned toward D, and then a cloud of purplish smoke whooshed from it. In a matter of seconds it became a white fog that spread about six feet from D, engulfing the rider and his steed. The cloud was dense, more like smoke than fog. Only someone with D's eyes would've caught the glittering specks of light dancing within it as it drew closer.

"Needles!" the Hunter's left hand said in a tense tone, but D had already leapt from the saddle.

Behind him, his horse whinnied. Though the body of the steed actually looked rather beautiful flecked with the glittering particles, their gleam turned to crimson and the horse cried out once before falling on its side. Its artificial hide lost its color, wrinkles covered it, and it was ultimately fated to shrivel up like a mummy. The swarm of minute needles had drained the cyborg horse of its fluids like a school of piranhas.

The purplish smoke and needles pursued D.

D put his left hand against the door to the inner courtyard.

"That door won't open for anyone but the general," Madame Laurencin jeered from overhead. "And I'll have you know that all the technology in his castle was the Sacred Ancestor's very own—oh!"

Letting out a gasp of astonishment, the Noblewoman launched herself into the air. She was a lovely white blossom in human form. As Madame Laurencin landed, she watched the deadly smoke and needles disappear through the doorway.

Turning, she called out a command: "My carriage!"

From a nearby stand of trees there appeared a white carriage shaped like a swan, and it halted beside the Noblewoman. It was drawn by a team of four black horses. Their manes glistened in the midday sun.

"Does he think I'd let him get away? This man has got the better of my deadly smoke and loving needles—but I'll see to it he dies by my hand."

"Take your hand, milady?"

After clinging to the white-gloved hand the driver extended and climbing into her seat, the beautiful demoness suddenly took the long needle she held in her right hand and drove it through the base of the driver's skull. There was no reason for it—it merely served to vent some of her frustration. The man went into convulsions before he could utter a word, but as she kicked him from the driver's seat and took up the reins, the face she wore was that of the devil himself.

One lash of the reins. The black horses dashed down the cobblestone path. Up ahead, the door was closing.

"Of all the nerve!"

A plume of purple smoke stretched from her pipe, and when it struck the door, it became like mummified wood, collapsing at the mere tremors from the iron-shod hooves. Bursting through the dust that hung there like a cloudbank, Madame Laurencin entered the inner courtyard.

At the center of this vast if somewhat parched area was a plaza where combat units and weapons might be mustered, while off to the right was a verdant section adorned with lush plants. That's what D now faced.

"So, in keeping with your looks, you've come to pick flowers? I can't allow that!"

As if the Noblewoman's tenacity had been conveyed to them, the horses galloped down the stone-paved path toward D. Their iron shoes sent sparks flying.

Thirty yards . . . Twenty . . .

The darkness spun. When the carriage closed to within ten yards, D turned around. Both hands hung easily by his sides, as if he were receiving a visit from a friend, yet a chill went down the spine of the fiendish Madame Laurencin.

A semitransparent cover shielded both the driver's seat and the area for passengers. A force field.

D didn't move. He was a gorgeous statue, black and mysterious. The black horses surged forward like dark, angry waves—and ahead of them, D crouched down.

What Madame Laurencin saw was a momentary flash. The two lead animals went down abruptly. With no time to apply the emergency brake, the second pair of horses collided with the first, tripping and sending the carriage sailing into the air. A split second before the horses' hooves could fall on him, D had leapt to the left. And in the process, he'd struck out with his sword. The blade had done a splendid job of severing the forelegs of the first two cyborg horses at the knees.

Ignoring the cries rising from the horses in their death throes, D looked up at the sky. Madame Laurencin's laughter rained down from a height of some fifteen feet.

"It was said that making oneself stroll across the sky was something only country bumpkins did," the Noblewoman said, closing her eyes absentmindedly. Reminiscence leant her elegant visage a vague wistfulness. "But I loved it so. Rivers flowing in the moonlight, strolling lovers, the rhythm of the waltzes, and dance parties that could go on forever—it was a good time."

The thread of murderous intent that linked the two of them went slack for an instant. Suddenly, a soft voice spoke clear words in Madame Laurencin's ear.

Knowing neither life nor death
Therefore, I call thee by this name
Thou art the Distant One

Eyes open wide with surprise reflected D's face. High in the air, the Noblewoman who should've been sneering at him was thrown off balance.

"That song . . . It was performed only for a chosen few among the Nobility at the Sacred Ancestor's manse—and it was written by someone not even *we* ever saw . . . one who they say was his wife. How could you know it?"

Madame Laurencin closed her eyes. Even with them shut, the unearthly beauty of D's countenance was burned into her retinas. Somewhere in the chaos that was her memory a tiny light sparked. The light grew no brighter, but the Noblewoman let what it'd revealed fall from her lips.

"Those eyes, that nose, those handsome features . . . You . . . Your highness is . . ."

D was right before her eyes. Neither the Noblewoman's reminiscences nor the troubling mental state that caused her to call him "your highness" meant anything to the Hunter in black. Bringing his blade down from the high position as he bounded, he split Madame Laurencin lengthwise, then brought his sword around again to pierce her through the heart. Her golden hair and her dress soon turned to gray dust that crumbled in midair, but by then D had landed and was headed once again toward an area by the stand of trees.

"Ah, a medicinal herb garden," the hoarse voice remarked, sounding impressed.

That section of the inner courtyard was in fact a vast expanse of trees and plants stretching so far in every direction that all of it couldn't be taken in at the same time, with the blooms arranged into red, blue, yellow, purple, and white in a dazzling display that was both splendid and sweet.

"That's jupon de la neel—a flower so poisonous it kills any creature that comes within three feet of it. Oh, are those bones I see scattered all around it? Over there's what they call gatgaya cherian, a kind of luring herb with a scent that controls the minds of living creatures. I hear it played quite a large role in the battle with the Capital. And across from that—"

Paying no attention, D stepped into the center of the flower garden, entered a part where the dense green growth was nearly knee high, and after looking around pulled up a few of the plants at his feet.

"That's the stuff!" the hoarse voice said with apparent satisfaction.

As D put them in one of his coat's inner pockets, the voice continued, "At any rate, you've got what you came for. Now you just have to rescue Rosaria, so—"

D turned around.

Blurs of silver came to an unexpected stop—one in each of his eyes. They were glittering silver roses. In a heartbeat they were batted down, shattering into countless silver needles when they struck the ground.

Though not even D had taken notice, Madame Laurencin's ashes had

risen on the wind, eddying in midair to form a pair of roses. Perhaps they were a manifestation of the Noblewoman's last bit of will, for they drifted through the air, closing to within an inch or two of D.

He covered both eyes with one hand. From between his fingers, streams of blood appeared.

"Did she get your eyes?" the hoarse voice inquired, and it was little wonder it couldn't disguise how surprised and shaken it was. After all, the handsome Vampire Hunter had been robbed of his vision just as he was about to embark on the most difficult of rescues.

"I'll get rid of the poison. But as for your sight—that'll take three whole days to fix even using the purifying flame. No choice in this situation but to fall back."

This seemed the appropriate course of action.

D said, "I was hired to do a job."

"That you were," the voice agreed easily.

D's character didn't drive him to do it—it was debatable whether D's character ever moved him at all. But he'd taken a job. Whether he could see or not, he'd get it done. And his left hand was merely acknowledging his cold code of ethics as a professional.

"Then, shall we go? Just be real damn careful not to let me get lopped off."

"Duke of Xenon."

On hearing his name called, the Nobleman turned his eyes to the high ceiling.

"It is I, Gaskell. Madame Laurencin has been slain," the voice quickly continued.

"I see," replied a man who was naked aside from a pair of white briefs. He'd been standing by the window for some time with arms and legs outstretched, basking in the sunlight—since just after daybreak. Though he'd come to the castle the previous evening, he'd essentially spent the entire night awaiting the dawn, then disrobed.

True to the manner in which the general had addressed him, his name was Roland, Duke of Xenon. He appeared to be thirty-four or thirty-five years old, but his actual age was in excess of three thousand years.

While toying with his golden chest hair, he said, "That old bag was defeated by this man called D—it seems he's not a Hunter in name alone. So, what do you want?"

By all appearances, this was a man not prone to nervousness. In fact, for a Noble, his lack of refinement was a far cry from both the elegance of the Capital and the dauntlessness of the Frontier, as was manifest by his sagging belly and his demeanor toward the general. Seeing that he was a sunbathing Noble, there really could be no mistake.

"Well, I must choose who will go next, and I should like to ask you to do it, sir."

Gaskell's words came less as a request and more as pure coercion, yet

the Duke of Xenon scratched his head and asked, “Does it really have to be me?”

He didn’t seem to be taking this very seriously.

“No, there’s no special reason why it must be you, sir,” the general said, bewilderment in his voice. Apparently the great general found this middle-aged Nobleman difficult to manage.

“Then could you maybe have one of the others do it instead? As you can see, I’m really enjoying myself in this stuff they call ‘sunlight.’ My, but it feels wonderful. Indeed, I wish to thank you, my good general, for so graciously making this opportunity possible.”

“That is all well and good, but if you decline the request, sir, I shall be forced to send someone else. For instance, the holy knight Lady Ann.”

There must’ve been something crafty about the general’s tone as he said that name, for his voice had a despicable ring to it, and sure enough the duke, in nothing save his briefs, sat right up.

“That won’t do—that won’t do at all, General! Oh, this is a dirty trick. Very well, if you would send that child into battle, then I shall go.”

“You did an excellent job of convincing him, General.”

When Baron Schuma said this from where he lay on a nearby couch, General Gaskell let his distaste show on his face. No matter how urbane the speech of these Nobles was, each and every word bristled with venomous barbs. Those he’d assembled had proven themselves exceptional individuals in the past—each with the kind of power that might be found in perhaps one out of ten thousand—yet it appeared they didn’t care a whit about Gaskell. Though they didn’t commit any overtly hostile acts, the looks they gave him, the way they addressed him, and their overall bearing had given Gaskell a glimpse of them in two short days that drove him mad with rage, but also left him rather melancholy.

In the past—actually, even at present—the mere perception of derision or provocation directed at him would’ve been enough to make him tear the perpetrator limb from limb on the very spot. Although it might not prove so easy as doing so to his own vassals, Gaskell was confident that he could indeed manage. However, this time things just weren’t going right. More accurately, he simply couldn’t do it. And he knew the reason why. The only power that could force him to do anything was at work. But toward what end?

At the sight of Gaskell about to plunge into an uncharacteristic confusion, Baron Schuma donned a malicious grin, but as if just making sure, he asked, “Incidentally, you *do* intend to use the holy knight, don’t you?”

Warped with suffering as it was, Gaskell’s face formed a devilish smile. Finally he had returned to his old self—a fiend who feasted on the pain of others and delighted in screams for mercy more than the most heavenly music.

“That goes without saying,” the general replied, giving a stately bow

entirely in keeping with his infamous, bloodcurdling tone of voice.

II

Going from the inner courtyard to the tower where Rosaria was imprisoned was simple enough, as there weren't any soldiers or other obstacles.

At this show of complete indifference the left hand cursed, saying, "He's a cunning bastard."

Along the way, a tiny mouth in the Hunter's left hand had sucked in air and drunk D's blood. And each time it consumed one of those elements, a pale blue flame blazed deep in its maw. With the energy it received, it replenished D's stamina and set about healing his wounds—at present, it was working on his eyes. However, the poison the millennia-spanning sorceress Madame Laurencin had used was indeed virulent beyond all compare, and it would take extended care to undo the damage. For three more days, D would be forced to meet the foes descending on him in his blinded state, with nothing to rely on but his left hand and his own instincts.

"You know, this is just too easy. It has to be a trap!"

D had begun to ascend a spiraling stone staircase. Climbing to a height of roughly fifty yards, he reached the highest floor . . . but there wasn't even a guard posted. On one wall was a crude circular window, and across from it was a stone wall with a door in it. D effortlessly tore off its old-fashioned but sturdy lock. Although all attacks by electronic devices and automated security systems could be averted—and there were few of them to begin with—old-fashioned trapdoors or dropping ceilings were still a concern as D quietly opened the door.

Though as much could be told from outside, the room was fairly spacious. Light streamed in through a small window in the wall and a skylight in the ceiling, announcing that it was nearly dusk. Rosaria lay on a bed in the center of the room. This was not the time for her to sleep.

"Rosaria," D called to her, but still she didn't move a muscle. Some spell or drug had put her to sleep.

From around the bed came the sound of running water. It coursed through a channel about six feet wide. It was more like a small river than a ditch.

"Oh, my," the left hand groaned. "It figures a Greater Noble would use a handy trick like this."

The fact that vampires couldn't cross running water was common knowledge, passed down since time immemorial. There were examples of drunken Nobles falling into rivers where children could play in safety and subsequently drowning in the knee-deep water. One of the simplest ways to keep the Nobility away, it was utilized far and wide across the Frontier, but up until now there'd been no known case of a Noble using it in his own home. For that alone, General Gaskell could be said to possess a bold and frightening vision.

Halting at the door, D turned his face toward the circulating water, quickly extended his right hand, and rubbed his thumb against the first joint of his index finger. Perhaps due to the strength of his nails, the skin broke on his index finger and fresh blood instantly welled to the surface. He swung the finger.

The drop of blood didn't leave a trail behind it as it fell into the center of the flow. The instant it made contact, the water's surface seemed to boil and a number of what looked to be two-and-a-half-foot-thick eels raised their black, snakelike heads. Their mouths couldn't be discerned, but near the end of heads that tapered seamlessly back into their bodies were a pair of gleams—apparently their eyes, shining like twin lights. Seemingly possessed of the ability to catch the scent of blood in the air, they turned in unison toward the Hunter. In the depths of those gleaming eyes a fiercer spark was born, flickering restlessly. The eyes had originally served to lure prey to them in the lightless depths of the water, but it seemed they'd undergone certain modifications, as the left hand promptly said, "Oh, so they can use hypnotism, can they?"

D had already stepped forward. With a quiet gait he headed toward the flowing water.

The glowing, blinking eyes awaited him—waiting for the arrival of their mesmerized prey. When D's feet came within a yard of the water's edge, the faces of the black pseudo-eels split lengthwise, revealing pink maws and tiny white fangs. Already three feet out of the water, the heads rose higher and higher. At a height of fifteen feet, they halted. Did the saliva drip from their mouths due to hunger, or did they comprehend D's beauty?

A heartbeat later, they hissed like snakes and struck down at him from above. Their mouths appeared to tear into D's face, head, shoulders, and abdomen—but at that moment a silvery glint flashed out. The sight of the eels sinking their fangs into D's body had been nothing more than an illusion. Every one of their heads passed through D's form or missed him entirely, hitting the floor still poised to attack. Following this, bright blood fell like rain.

D had moved by them at an unbelievable speed. Now the headless bodies twisted weakly, and then quickly grew motionless. Though creatures of this ilk usually lasted quite a long time even after being fatally wounded, the blind D's swordplay didn't allow for that.

The running water had already been stained red, but it seemed that no other guardians remained there.

D reached the water's edge. Since starting his advance, he hadn't paused for a second. What's more, in severing over a dozen heads, he hadn't been hit by even a drop of their blood. In light of the fact that he was currently blind, it was a hint of how utterly fearsome this young man was.

He plunged the blade in his right hand into the flow.

"Thirty feet deep," his left hand said. "Swimming it'd be tough. Jump

it.”

Before it had even finished speaking, D’s body was sailing through the air. Although he’d undoubtedly kicked off the floor, no sound had rung out, and he’d showed no signs of bending his knees before making what could be described as an unholy leap.

A distance of six or so feet was nothing to him. However, right over the center of the flow, something went wrong. The hem of his coat and the brim of his traveler’s hat turned down rapidly. The running water was refusing to allow a Noble to pass. His graceful arc and great speed were thrown into disarray, but half of D’s boots narrowly managed to land on the far side as he stood once more on the floor.

Approaching the sleeping Rosaria, D quickly put his left hand against her brow.

“Well, I’ll be—she’s under a powerful spell. And drugs, to boot,” the hoarse voice groaned. “But luckily, that kind of drug can be treated with the same herb we just got for the antidote. Should I fix her up here?”

“No,” D said, putting Rosaria over his shoulder. In light of the deadly battles that might take place during their escape, having her asleep would keep her from getting in the way.

On this side there was a collapsible metal gangway for crossing the flow. It was set up so it could be triggered by remote control from the opposite bank. Laying it across the water with what seemed like an easy one-handed toss, D made his escape from the tower less than a minute later.

Though the thunder had subsided, the wind had grown stronger, and the air itself seemed to have taken on more of a chill. Juke’s condition was only deteriorating, with his breathing more labored and his body burning hot as a flame.

“Where the hell has he got to?” Gordo cursed, though it wasn’t D he was referring to, but rather Sergei.

He wasn’t sure exactly when his other companion had disappeared, but he hadn’t seen any sign of him for over three hours. The man had been pretty scrawny for a transporter from the start, but he hadn’t struck him as being irresponsible enough to take off at a time like this, and only a true idiot would run around these parts all alone. At any rate, Gordo couldn’t leave his post now since he had to watch both Juke and their cargo all by himself, but it would be evening soon.

“Shit!”

He was just smacking his fist into the opposite hand when off to his left he heard the pattering of something walking closer through the grass.

“Sergei?” Gordo inquired, his six-shooter already raised.

The footsteps halted for a moment, then quickly drew nearer.

“Answer me. Is that you, Sergei?”

It couldn’t be D. There would’ve been the sound of the Hunter’s horse. If it wasn’t Sergei, then it was likely some kind of demon or monster. Juke

had been moved into the cargo wagon, but that wouldn't withstand more than one blow from a monster's fangs or claws, and there were also spirits that could pass right through high-polymer steel. No matter what the case, Gordo would have to deal with it alone.

"Suit yourself then," he said, ready to do whatever was necessary. In case of emergency, he'd given Juke an incendiary grenade. It went without saying that it wasn't intended for self-defense.

When a human form appeared from a stand of trees, he pulled his six-shooter's hammer back almost all the way.

"Huh?"

Stiff with tension, Gordo's expression suddenly softened.

Trampling a path through the grass was a girl who looked like she couldn't have been a day over ten, her golden hair in braids. With clear blue eyes, she wore a neat pink dress of a kind that only suited small girls, and the legs protruding from its knee-length skirt wore gray knee socks and white shoes. A gold bracelet studded with red and blue gems adorned the arm carrying a gray flower basket chock full of blossoms. Even Gordo, who'd been so tense he was ready to explode, got the impression that the whole area around the little girl had suddenly been transformed into a splendorous flower garden.

While the man remained silent, the girl said softly, "Move and I'll shoot," then halted and raised both hands of her own volition. Her tone and her gestures were terribly endearing.

The muzzle of Gordo's weapon gradually dropped.

"Don't move, missy," Gordo ordered her.

He didn't know why he didn't shoot. There was no way any decent young lady would be out in a place like this.

Arms still raised to the sky, the girl stared at him blankly.

"What's your name?" Gordo asked.

"In a situation like this, it's customary to give your *own* name first," she said, little angelic lips releasing an equally angelic tone.

Gordo suddenly felt much calmer.

"You'll have to pardon me. The name's Gordo. I'm a transporter, you see."

"I am Lady Ann."

"I see. Well, you certainly are a little lady. But what are you doing out here?"

"Picking flowers," she replied matter-of-factly.

"Where's your home?"

The girl smiled thinly. It gave Gordo the creeps.

"That castle!" she said, her voice changed now. White teeth peeked from between ruby red lips. They were tapered like an awl.

"Shiiiit!"

Don't let appearances deceive you—that was an ironclad rule for survival on the Frontier.

Gordo pulled the trigger, and his six-shooter howled. Six thunder balls knocked the girl backward. Black earth kicked up from the ground behind her.

Her pink dress torn to rags, the girl lay there motionless.

III

Despite the fact that, in an objective sense, Gordo had just dealt with her in a horrible fashion, he didn't lower the muzzle of his weapon. The greatest tension rolled over him in a wave. He'd shot an innocent little girl. Even knowing that he was dealing with a monster, her outward appearance left him with unavoidable feelings of remorse and self-reproach. Nonetheless, the instant a great hollowness filled his heart, the monster would strike back at him. That was the wisdom of the Frontier, gained from the deaths of tens of thousands.

"What happened, Gordo?" Juke called out from the cargo wagon in a thread-thin voice. Standing there on the narrow line between life and death, the other man didn't even notice.

Ten seconds . . . Nothing yet . . .

Twenty . . . Still nothing . . .

Thirty seconds . . .

Forty . . .

The hem of Lady Ann's skirt rustled faintly, but on realizing that this was the wind's doing, Gordo lowered his weapon. Sweat soaked every inch of his body and his breathing was ragged. Still, he'd recovered enough presence of mind to turn around and shout, "I shot someone. Don't come out here."

Wiping off his sweat, he raised his six-shooter again and walked over to the corpse. On reaching her tattered feet, Gordo gasped.

"A *doll*?"

Hair so golden you could practically smell it, clear blue eyes, plump arms and legs—all of them were fake. The hair was metallic fiber, the eyes glass beads, and the face was made of wood. So how had she seemed so full of life a minute ago? Even the demonic expression she'd worn when she bared her fangs had been that of a living creature.

As Gordo stood stock still, feeling like someone had just removed his brain, an innocent chime rang in his ears—a singing voice like golden blossoms raining down from the heavens.

You shot Lady Ann, the voice told him. *But you can't crush me. Please, hurry and save me.*

The way the girl's voice made the blood in Gordo's veins run cold, it was as if all his will and his life were sending a message from his brain to his body, and he grew tense. Like his body, his eyes had frozen in place on a single spot, so the sight of that hole-riddled doll rising spryly burned itself into his retinas. The right eye had been blown out of the doll's face, but the innocent face of the girl was superimposed on it, becoming the doll's, then the girl's, by turns.

"I'll give you a flower—leech grass freshly picked from Lady Ann's own flower garden."

A childishly plump hand took a pure white blossom from the basket of flowers hanging from the opposite arm and hurled it at Gordo's chest. In the blink of an eye, the white blossom was stained a vivid vermilion, and Gordo bent backward in hellish agony. His six-shooter barked off in completely the wrong direction as he sprawled on the ground with arms and legs spread. The now-crimson blossom was sending roots deep into his body. That much he was certain he could feel.

"What a powerful specimen you are," Lady Ann said with glee from beside his head. "So full of blood. You're ready for a second one, aren't you?"

The grim reaper's hand reached into her deadly flower basket. And as it took hold of another lovely white bloom, someone called out from behind her, "Lady Ann."

Whoever said this had undoubtedly made their throw before she could turn. The instant her blue irises reflected Sergei, a white flower pierced her right between the eyes—a blossom of leech grass just like the one the girl held.

"Ah!" Lady Ann cried out, backing away. As she'd prepared to throw the flower she held at her new foe, the white bloom against her brow had swiftly turned red. The figure that staggered and fell was beyond a doubt the real Lady Ann.

Racing over, Sergei bound her with the rope every good transporter wore on his belt, then went over to Gordo and reached for the flower stuck in his chest. The bloom looked to have swollen to twice its previous size. In his hand, it felt like a damp sponge—when he tightened his grip on it, there was a squeak. The flower had squealed. On drinking Gordo's blood, it'd been transformed into a different form of life.

"Damn it!" Sergei cursed, giving it a hard pull. Loosing a shriek, it came out of Gordo, its roots still embedded. Getting to his feet, Sergei yanked. Dripping lifeblood like mud, the roots came out. They were a good fifteen feet long.

Discarding the plant, Sergei turned his gaze back to Gordo's pale-as-a-sheet face and grumbled, "Damn, you're gonna need a transfusion, aren't you?"

But where was the blood for that? And did he even have the necessary apparatus?

Nevertheless, Sergei turned around—looking back the way he'd come—and struck his chest in a confident manner, saying, "You're a lucky man, Gordo. You should thank me."

"There's something funny about this," the hoarse voice said in a tone no one save D could hear. He was in the inner courtyard with Rosaria on his back.

"This has all been too easy. That just doesn't seem right in the castle of a man like Gaskell. There's definitely a trap of some kind."

"Know what it is?" D asked.

Going straight through the courtyard, they would cross the forecourt and go out through the gates—retracing the exact same course by which they'd entered.

"No, at the moment I don't have a clue," the hoarse voice replied. Every time the tiny lips opened, pale blue flames danced in the depths of its throat. It burned with energy for healing D's eyes. For earth it'd eaten the soil from the flowerbeds, and there was wind as well. The water was D's blood. They lacked fire, but then that might've been asking too much.

The sky was a dusky blue–the creatures of the night would soon be awakening. Or in the case of this castle, perhaps it would've been better to say they'd be reclaiming their old lives. Nevertheless, there was no way Gaskell hadn't long since noticed D's intrusion and Rosaria's rescue, though it was strange that there hadn't been any further obstacles.

D suddenly broke into a run.

"You seriously thinking of charging right down the middle? *This* should be fun."

Common sense dictated that if you knew your presence had been detected and you had to cross such a large area, you'd creep along the edges, using trees and buildings for cover as you went. But running straight down the middle of the courtyard—while in keeping with D's character, it could also be described as the epitome of recklessness. Considering that he had Rosaria on his back, it was particularly rash of him. If someone had accused him of using her as a shield against bullets and arrows, he wouldn't have been able to protest.

But did D know what was going to happen? That was precisely how it seemed. For he cut across the courtyard, through the forecourt, and escaped the castle without any harm befalling him.

“Funny,” the hoarse voice muttered, but D seemed to pay it no mind as he raced down the road. “Did you know you weren’t gonna be attacked?”

“If any attacks were going to happen, they’d have come before I reached the tower,” D said, offering a rare explanation.

“Is Gaskell soft in the head? No, there’s no way that could be the case with a man known as such a great general. Which means—”

“He’s being stopped—”

“What?”

“Most likely.”

“Who’d stop Gaskell?” the hoarse voice said, its tone making it clear it was already looking within itself for the answer. The wait wasn’t terribly long.

“There’s no point giving it much thought. There’s only one person it could be. But why would *he* do that?”

There was no answer.

As the vast blue twilight spread, D dashed off down the steep incline. Thanks to his ungodly skill, Rosaria wasn’t jarred in the least.

He was halfway down the slope when a voice called from far off in the distance, “Heeeey!”

Why did D halt when there was still so much space between them?

An instant later—and not ten feet in front of him—there was a vicious crash as a purplish figure dropped from the sky. In the several seconds it took for the ground to finish quaking, D sensed that it was a person garbed in something like an enormous chitinous exoskeleton—or rather, that it really *was* an exoskeleton. It definitely wasn’t a traditional suit of armor. Standing ten feet tall, with arms and torso swollen to grotesque proportions, the rough design was far different from the elegant work the Nobility had produced in their later years. It may have even dated back to the chaotic times of territorial disputes between different Noble factions and fighting off extraterrestrial invaders. But rough though it might have been, the one within it had come to the castle to serve the general, and the knight’s exoskeleton didn’t have so much as a crack in it when he got up without a single mechanical sound.

“Were you a bit surprised?” the man quickly inquired in a deep, rich tone. This alone would be enough to make many a young lady’s heart beat faster. “When I called out just now, I purposely made it sound like I was much further away. And then, all of a sudden, here I am right in front of you. How was that?”

His tone was extremely earnest. He seriously wanted to know the answer.

“You’re a Noble, aren’t you?” D said.

“No, no!” the man replied, waving his right hand as if his suit were out of control. Being a device made by the Nobility, its movements were every bit as smooth as a human being’s. “It’s more correct to say I was *originally* a Noble. You see, I was banished by the Sacred Ancestor.”

The armored figure guffawed.

“The fact of the matter is, I womanized a little too much, to the point where I even worked my way through all the court ladies assembled in the Capital. But as it happened, one of them was the apple of the Sacred Ancestor’s eye—on account of which I wound up sealed away in a coffin for more than two millennia. My brain was set so that all I could do was remain conscious, and let me tell you, that was hard. I was so bored I thought I’d lose my mind! If my daughter hadn’t saved me, right now I’d—well, I shudder just thinking about it. At any rate, while I was buried deep in the earth, I was stripped of my Noble standing. Now I’m just a plain-old man of leisure. My original name was Roland, Duke of Xenon.”

“The Duke of Xenon?” a surprised tone called out from the vicinity of D’s left fist. “Roland? That bastard Gaskell’s called in a heavy hitter.”

“Why are you here?” D inquired.

“I don’t know,” he said, shrugging his armored shoulders. When executed by a ten-foot-tall robotic figure, the act was simply humorous. “If I thought about it for a while, I might remember. Come to mention it, I get the feeling there was a reason, but it’s all in a fog now. But as a soldier from the Capital, I fought against General Gaskell to a deadlock. And now I take orders from him. It seems even Gaskell himself doesn’t know the reason. Yeah, it’s pretty interesting.”

“Madame Laurencin; Roland, the Duke of Xenon—he’s collected the Nobility’s greatest warriors. Wonder who else he’s got?”

The muttering from the Hunter’s left hand made the armored form stand up a little straighter.

“Oh, your left hand talks?” he asked with admiration. “I hear that’s the source of your life, and I can’t say I’m not tempted to cut it off and find out. Now, don’t get worked up into a murderous rage. Even through this exoskeleton your aura gives me goose bumps. You’re no average Hunter. You’re not even like ordinary dhampirs.”

“Have you said your piece?” D asked him. Anyone who heard this would know it was a quiet declaration of war. Suddenly, even the wind died down.

“No, not yet. However, I have to slay you. If I don’t, my dear daughter will be put in harm’s way. Lady Ann’s her name—do you know her? Hmm, don’t suppose you would. Though I have nothing against you, I’ll slay you for my daughter’s sake. Forgive me!”

And as he spoke, his right fist assailed the Hunter. A punch moving in excess of Mach 1 blistered through the air, and the smell of ozone immediately prickled in D’s nose.

D narrowly dodged the blow by a fist twice the size of the average person’s face. As he leapt back fifteen feet, his sword glittered in his right hand.

The armored fist spouted blue fire. It was the work of the blow D’s sword had dealt it while the Hunter was on the move.

RUINS ON AN ANCIENT BATTLEFIELD

CHAPTER 3

I

The armored giant pressed his left hand to his fist. Pale sparks shot from between his fingers, and tendrils of electricity snaked out.

"Impressive. This is what you can do when you can't see? You're not an average person after all. This suit is made of superdense dupronium. Ah!" he gasped, as D bounded, looking like a haunting black bird as he descended in the twilight. His blade flashed out. However, this second attack struck the right arm the Nobleman had raised to shield his head and was deflected.

"That's what happens when I'm ready for you. It's dupronium to start with, but it's been treated so that I can will it to be even stronger. And I won't let my guard down again."

And then the duke dashed into action. Over five tons of armor closed on D with all the speed of a swallow in flight. His left hand threw a hook. When the punch was halfway to impacting on D's face, a three-foot blade slipped from the duke's arm from wrist to elbow and the hook became a horizontal slash. There was a sharp cutting sound in the air—and in a copse far beyond the reach of the blade, five or six neatly severed trees fell across the road. The speed was so great it created a vacuum, and anything that touched it would split open like the famous slice of the monstrous Kamaitachi.

The bottom of D's coat suddenly opened like a mouth. The duke's blade was coming back—but a split second before it did, the Hunter kicked off the ground. Becoming a bolt of black lightning, he flew at Roland's chest.

"Aaaargh!" the giant bellowed, his cry accompanied by blue electrical discharge.

The enormous armored combatant staggered back smoothly. Perhaps the thrust at his chest didn't suffice, as the Hunter's blade came around for a second attack.

Roland's massive, five-ton form sailed easily through the air. A great branch thirty feet up in an enormous tree by the side of the road bent under his weight as he stood straight up on it. Undoubtedly this exoskeleton could walk across a damp sheet of paper without tearing it.

"So, does this mean your own will's grown stronger, too?" the armored figure asked, pressing a hand against his chest. There were no streaks of blood to be seen with the pale sparks. "Perhaps I'd have been better off going with a regular metal suit of armor after all. At any rate, I'll take my leave here. But my daughter's life depends on this. You'll see me again, and soon."

The gigantic form left the branch—and as the Hunter stood there, his foe flew off into a stand of trees in a manner that suggested nothing short of antigravity. He hadn't made a single sound.

“Capitalizing on your injury—or should I say, your blindness? The only reason you were able to block his attack was because you couldn’t see!” the hoarse voice said, its tone carrying a sigh of relief.

In a battle to the death, combatants used their own two eyes to follow the movements of their foe. But even D wouldn’t have been able to follow the speed of the exoskeleton. Only by relying on blind instinct had he deflected the swift and deadly blow, then counterattacked.

“You really gonna be blind like this for a while? I suppose it’s better for *that* guy, at least,” the Hunter’s left hand said to him in all seriousness while, moving as if he could actually see, D went over to where he’d set Rosaria down by the side of the road and scooped her up.

The exoskeleton was equipped with automatic repair circuits. They would work to restore not only the armor, but also the person using it.

D’s sword had narrowly missed Roland’s heart, instead piercing his right lung clean through to his back. The laws of physics said it was impossible to penetrate the armor, yet the swordsman had come within a fraction of an inch of skewering the man within it—thanks to his peerless skill with a blade. What’s more, Roland’s cellular tissue wouldn’t knit back together. An injury from an ordinary sword or spear—or even from a bullet—could be healed by the ageless and immortal flesh of the Nobility in the blink of an eye, with the wound closing immediately. Even nerve-cell damage that human beings never recovered from could be repaired by an ability on par with the mythical Hydra. It wasn’t a special sword. And this hadn’t been some bizarre sword technique that could bend three-dimensional space. It was just an ordinary thrust. And yet, the ravaged cells gave the duke searing pain, and the lifeblood gushing out required immediate medical attention.

“That damned monster.”

Coming from a Noble’s lips, it seemed like a joke. However, shock and fear supported the truth of his words. The medical systems had told him it would take a full year for him to recover completely.

“I can’t wait that long. At any rate, just give me makeshift aid. Once repairs to the suit are finished, I’m moving out.”

Thirty minutes later, the computer gave him the okay.

For travelers on the Noble-infested Frontier, transfusion equipment was an absolute necessity. In addition to bites from vampires, wounds from the teeth and claws of monsters required quick treatment to staunch the bleeding, disinfect the wounds, and replace the lost blood. From kits even a child could use to the artificial blood synthesizers normally carried by large-scale caravans and transport parties, there were easily several hundred varieties crafted by businesses in the Capital and out on the Frontier or even by private physicians. The procedure Sergei had performed on Gordo had involved one of the simple kits, but it had kept him alive, at any rate.

After putting him to sleep in the wagon along with Juke, Sergei went over to the villain lying in the grass. Seeing the innocent face with a crimson flower sticking out of her forehead, Sergei got the feeling he'd become a merciless killer.

"So, what do I do now?" he mused, head tilting to one side as he looked down at the girl.

The ironclad rule of the Frontier was that monsters were to be disposed of, by burning whenever possible. There was no need to dig them a grave.

"Out of my own interest, I'd really love to keep this one alive and bring her with us, but I've got those two and all our cargo to look after. Even supposing D came back, we'd still be too short handed to do it. I guess I'll have to get rid of her after all, won't I?"

A hoarse voice said, "Bring her along."

"What?"

Turning in amazement, Sergei saw D emerge from the depths of the forest.

"Did you just tell me to bring her along?"

What had become of his cyborg horse? There were a million things the man wanted to ask, but the second he saw Rosaria over the Hunter's shoulder, none of them mattered anymore. She'd been saved.

As usual, D didn't reply to Sergei's question but said instead, "That girl has a father. A Noble of preeminent skill even among those summoned by the general."

"What, take her as a hostage? That's underhanded, and I want no part of it."

"Staying alive is your primary concern," D said. "You can think about what's right or wrong later. If you survive, that is."

"But as long as we've got you along, we'll be okay, won't we?"

"The sky's getting stormy again," D said, putting one hand to the brim of his traveler's hat and looking down at Lady Ann.

The Hunter probably knew how badly he'd wounded Roland, as well as his recuperative abilities and the effect of the automated repair system.

"He'll be coming soon. To correct his daughter's mistake."

"Huh?"

A rumble from the earth swallowed Sergei's cry of surprise—it was a violent quaking. Though the man reached out in desperation, there was nothing to grab hold of, and he was down on his ass in less than a second.

D made a great leap back. In the spot where he'd been, the ground rose up. And what appeared in a shower of black earth was the same gigantic exoskeleton that D had wounded a short time earlier.

"He sure does hustle," the Hunter's left hand remarked with admiration.

"I'm in a hurry, you see, D."

"You said you were concerned about your daughter, didn't you?" D asked, the quaking of the earth having already given way to calm.

“Precisely. My daughter was one of those summoned. And if I don’t slay you, my daughter will be the next sent out here.”

“Is that what Gaskell said?”

As D spoke, both his hands hung easily by his side, making no move toward the hilt of his weapon.

“Yes.”

“Your daughter’s right there,” D said, pointing down by the feet of the toppled Sergei.

The electronic eyes set in the exoskeleton pivoted around in that direction, and Roland let out a little startled cry of “Lady Ann!”

Hurrying back to his feet, Sergei took what looked like a nail from his belt and pressed it against the girl’s forehead.

“Stop—or you’ll pay the price!”

“That’s no way to speak to the Nobility.”

Sergei shouted, “Get the hell out of here, and be quick about it! If not, I’ll drive this thing smack into the middle of your daughter’s brain. I know exactly how you mourned your daughter before.”

“How could you?” Roland said, his tone heavy.

“Because I’m the best damn archaeologist on the highways! This is where you fought Gaskell’s army. Which is why—”

Eyes that were supposedly lenses gave off a red glow, but the crimson beams of light were intercepted a foot shy of striking Sergei right between the eyes. D’s blade had been thrust out horizontally to deflect them.

The beams assailed the armored figure, who narrowly escaped them with a move at ungodly speed, suffering no more than some melting to the top of his head.

“You’re quick, D!”

Before the giant finished speaking, the figure in black seemed to be drawn right into his chest. The giant dashed to the left. D swung his blade whistling through the air in the same direction. His hand had grasped it up at the guard, but slid all the way down to the end of the hilt. But wasn’t he blind? What allowed him to move with such speed and attack with such precision?

The arc limned by his blade followed the leaping giant closely, making contact with the abdominal plates. And in a frightening display, the steel shredded like paper.

His fluid movements showing their first disruption, the giant landed some twenty-five feet away and fell to one knee, his balance thrown off. The earth shook. Ordinarily, he landed as light as a feather. As he looked upward with his electronic eyes, he caught a handsome form flying through the air. With his sword raised to strike, he looked so beautiful, so deadly. When that blade came whistling down, it would effortlessly cleave the heavy head in two, and bisect the rest of the unit as well.

With a mellifluous sound, D’s body bounced upward. All of the power he’d put into that blow had been channeled back at him. Twisting his body lithely as he landed and raising his blade to eye level, D realized that the

giant was holding a long spear straight out over his head. Bracing it with both hands, Roland, the Duke of Xenon, had managed to parry D's sword. But where in the world had he kept the more than twenty-foot-long weapon? What's more, D's blow had been calculated to kill. Given the Hunter's location, his power, and his force of will, what kind of weapon could resist being cut by him?

"This spear is special. It's a combination of ions and suspended molecules. When it materializes, it has five thousand times the strength of dupronium steel. Even the man known as D can't cut through it," Roland said, his words crafted of pure confidence. "What's more, I have this little trick—watch!"

The armored figure raised the spear by his side. It promptly vanished. Only the armored hand stretched toward D. It was a second later that the long spear pierced the figure in black through the chest and out the back. No, it didn't actually pierce him—where D's chest and back were impaled, they eddied as if space had been distorted. Nuclear fusion—the long spear had suddenly appeared, occupying part of the same space as D's body. Accordingly, rather than pierce him, it was more accurate to say it *grew* out of him.

As D tumbled forward, he braced his sword against the ground, clinging to it as he breathed his last.

II

"There are plenty of suspended molecules, you see."

Roland's right arm rose in the air, and a spear appeared in his hand. His left rose, and there was another one. A third appeared and he made a swing of the bunch, following which they vanished in an instant.

“As you can see, I can make as many as I like wherever I like, and make them disappear whenever I wish. So,” the giant said, swiveling his head to focus on Sergei’s location, “are you going to give me back my daughter?”

“Not a chance,” Sergei replied, wiping once at the cold sweat on his face. “You’d kill me as soon as I returned her. But I’ve taken precautions against that.”

He thrust his right hand into his coat.

“You and General Gaskell fought on this battlefield. The records say so. Everything was recorded, about the way you fought, how you looked for each other’s weak points, and what you discovered. I found this earlier not far from here. I don’t know which of you left it in the repository, but it’s sure gonna come in handy.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the massive armored figure said as he drew closer.

Once the duke was about ten feet away, Sergei pulled his right hand out of his jacket and raised it high. It held a tiny, withered leaf. But it had a startling effect.

The armored figure backed away, shielding both eyes. Its ungodly weightlessness was lost. Its heels dug at the earth, and the ground quaked ferociously.

“You little bastard—I can’t believe you . . .” Roland said, nearly panting the words.

“This is no time to stand around threatening me. Here you go!”

Sergei threw the leaf, and while it hung weakly in the air, the exoskeleton spun around and dashed off into the woods. More than the dwindling rumble, the movement of the falling trees told Sergei that the threat had passed.

Sinking right on the spot, he said, “I wasn’t really sure that would work—I must’ve been out of my mind!”

And the second he spoke, his brow was covered with sweat. For the next full minute he took deep breaths, slowly picking himself up and collecting the leaf in question from a spot on the ground about six feet away. The way he stared at it said quite clearly he still couldn’t believe it.

“This is it, eh?”

The short stalk he grasped between two fingers and held up to quiver in the wind was aconite—more commonly known as “wolfsbane.”

“At any rate, I guess I’d better bury D,” Sergei said, turning around.

Slumped forward on the ground, D did indeed have a long spear running through his chest and out his back. Despite the fact that dhampirs were as close as possible to the Nobility, or perhaps precisely because of it, everyone on the Frontier knew that a stake right through their heart was a hopeless situation.

“You know, I thought D was this incredible freak, but I guess there’s always someone tougher. And to think that guy’s weakness is one little leaf.

The world's just full of contradictions, I suppose."

"Damn right it is."

That familiar hoarse tone made Sergei tense up. Though he looked around in astonishment, there was no sign of anybody. So who'd been speaking with that voice all along? As ridiculous as it sounded, Sergei had figured D had been using ventriloquism all that time. Needless to say, he didn't know why the Hunter would do such a thing. However, D had expired, but the voice was there.

"What are you standing around for? Hey! Pull the spear out!" the voice ordered him as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Looking around him, Sergei inquired in a tremulous tone, "Wh-where are you?"

"Don't ask stupid questions. Are you gonna hurry up and remove this thing or not?"

"Wh-why don't you do it yourself?"

"I could, but I've got other, bigger things to attend to. So, are you gonna pull it out or what? If you don't, I'll tell D you refused to cooperate!"

"Tell D—what do you mean?"

"He's coming back to life."

"What?"

Sergei was stunned. What quickly brought him back to normal was something he'd read in a book while boning up on archaeology. The third volume of Domitius Browning's *Lore of the Nobility* described exactly the situation that was before him—among the Nobility, there were rare individuals who could be pierced through the heart with a wooden stake yet come back to life again if that stake were removed.

"Pull it out."

This time he walked over to D's corpse like a man under a spell and grabbed the shaft of the spear protruding from the Hunter's back. It was a fearful undertaking. The spear was gripped by the unnatural strength of D's muscles, and even pulling with all his might, Sergei couldn't free more than an inch of it at a time. Out of breath and dripping sweat, Sergei was half dead by the time he jerked the last inch free. As he let out a sigh that was close to a death rattle, he told the disembodied voice, "I got it out."

"Good for you."

Even on hearing this snotty reply, he didn't feel angry. Discarding the spear, Sergei collapsed on the grass, but he still kept a watchful eye on D's condition. Nothing had changed about the way the Hunter was slumped forward. The way his left hand was positioned under his chest suggested a natural reflex he'd had to try to pull the spear out the instant it'd been put through him.

"Huh?"

From the area where the left hand vanished under the Hunter the man saw something strange. It had glowed. A pale light was shining by D's chest. Though he was curious to see what it was, at the same time an unsettling feeling had come over him that left him unable to move. After

this, he saw no more of the blue light. Silence continued to stain the twilit forest a dusky blue.

Just then, the hoarse voice rang out, saying, “Hey, come over here.”

This time, Sergei didn’t have to be told twice. He was curious to start with—all he’d needed was an opportunity. He crawled over on his knees. When he reached D’s side, the left hand came right up from the corpse’s chest to rest on Sergei’s right knee.

“Shit!” he cried, but not because the hand that came to rest on him was palm up. Rather, the surface of the palm had rippled and twisted, and what could only be described as a human face had risen to the surface.

“Y-y-you . . .”

“What about me?” the countenanced carbuncle spat back at him from its tiny mouth. Seeing how pale blue flames blazed in the depths of its maw, Sergei almost fell over backward. Its fingers closed tightly on Sergei’s fingertips.

“You wanna see this? If so, give me your blood.”

“Wh-what the hell?”

Human beings couldn’t help but be horrified by the word *blood*—it was inextricably linked to the Nobility. This was particularly true when something was asking you to give it *your* blood.

“You damn sissy! Have you forgotten he’s a dhampir? To him, it’s just like you eating bacon and eggs. So hurry up and open a vein. He needs a lot of it.”

“I, uh—I can’t do that!”

“Oh, what a pain you are.”

Before Sergei could avoid it, D’s left hand had seized his right, and a sharp pain shot through the underside of his wrist. As he cried out, the warm fluid flowed from him. Or rather, what he felt was it being sucked out! His body was swiftly overcome by an indescribable floating sensation. Everything faded into the distance, and he fell at a terrific speed.

Just as his consciousness was about to be swallowed by the darkness, he clearly heard the hoarse voice say, “Okay, that’ll do.”

And when Sergei opened his eyes less than ten seconds later, a strapping man in black stood by his side looking down at him.

“D!”

“It seems I’m in your debt.”

“No—don’t be silly.”

“I’ll repay you for this sometime. We’re leaving the forest!”

“But it’s getting dark now,” the man started to say, but then he recalled D’s heritage. This was his time. That he recalled—and one more thing.

“D—your eyes . . .”

The Hunter had his eyelids shut.

“Not to worry. With my instructions and his instincts, we’ll manage somehow.”

Sergei decided to put his trust in that hoarse voice.

"Just so you know, I'm the only one who's still mobile," the transporter said.

A bunch of plants was tossed down at the man's feet.

"That herb is the antidote. Make a tea with it and have them drink it. And here's one more for you," the hoarse voice said.

As Sergei boiled the herbs, D came over to him. His movements were so smooth, he didn't look blind at all. Around them hung a stench to turn anyone's nose up.

"I'll thank you not to get in the way now since this is the trickiest part."

"Where'd you get the transfusion equipment for Gordo?" D inquired.

"Huh?" Sergei said, his suspicious gaze wandering through space for a second, but he soon understood. "Oh, that? As you probably know, pretty close to here there's a buried supply depot that the Capital's forces used during their campaign against Gaskell. That's where I appropriated it. And the flower I stuck in that little girl, as well."

Drained to the brink of death by Lady Ann's vampire bloom, the fallen Gordo had been saved by the Noble device that rested next to him.

"You know where it is, right?"

"Sure," Sergei replied, bringing a spoonful of the medicine he'd just brewed up to his lips.

"Jeez," he sputtered, spitting it out again. "That's some potent stuff!" he said with a grimace.

Looking right at him, the blind D told him, "Then after you've had the other two drink it, you'll have to show me the way."

The medicine had a dramatic effect—one or two mouthfuls was all it took. Sergei held their mouths closed so they were forced to swallow it instead of spitting it out, and as he watched, the flushed hue left Juke's face and his agonized expression faded. Sergei's eyes nearly popped out at the way the man's incredibly shallow breathing instantly returned to normal.

After the medicine had been administered but before the Hunter and his guide could leave, Juke sat up on his cot. On hearing from D what they were up to, he told them, "Yeah, I'll look after things here. Get going already."

With Sergei in the lead, D headed further into the forest. After advancing about three hundred yards, Sergei halted. "There it is," he said, pointing at the towering accumulation of rock and soil up ahead. It looked like a high, sprawling fortification.

"But then you can't see it, can you?"

"No, *I* see it," the hoarse voice replied. "Yes, indeed."

"Getting through it's a little tough, but the entrance is over here," Sergei said, though for some reason he looked somewhat jaded as he guided D over to the crack running up the right side of the door. From where the two of them stood it looked like no more than a thin thread of a

crevasse, but circling over to the right showed it to be wide enough that an adult should be able to fit through it.

"It was originally sealed up, but at some point it cracked open. The Nobility sure are a strange race," Sergei sighed.

D, after his habit, said nothing. And he was still blind.

III

In a sense, Sergei's observation was correct. The contradiction most vividly demonstrated by the actions of the Nobility was their love of all things medieval. Their architecture, clothing, decorations, paintings—every field of artistic endeavor had a Gothic flavor. The Nobility were so immersed in it, it occasionally caused them to do the strangest things. Although they could probably erect a metropolis along the lines of the Capital anywhere if given three days' time, they left the desolate mountains, wild rivers, and shadowy forests of the Frontier just as they found them, raising old-fashioned castles covered with pinnacles and gables instead of modern buildings and domes. All of their roads were paved with stone, although highways were occasionally built exclusively for ultra-high-speed transportation.

And here was a prime example of this contradiction. This installation could easily withstand a direct hit by a hydrogen bomb, yet its entrance was sealed not by doors of some supersteel alloy but instead by a colossal stone slab. Long years had weathered the great stone and cracked it. And that was an open invitation to intruders.

"I'll go first," Sergei said, turning sideways to slip through the crack. The giant slab was a good thirty feet across.

The place he managed to enter was a spot left scarred by the legacy of a horrible destruction. The ceiling and walls buckled in as if they'd taken a great blast from outside, and Sergei actually trembled. And yet, thanks to a light that radiated from nowhere in particular, he had no trouble seeing. He sensed D behind him.

"When I first saw this, I was heartbroken, but I went in a little further anyway. And then—"

After they cut through an area where pillars that looked to be as big as buildings supported the crumbling walls, the passageway took a hard right, and Sergei then led the Hunter to a golden door. There was a switch for it. Once Sergei pushed it, the door opened with a grinding sound.

The only way to describe what lay inside was to call it an enormous warehouse. Innumerable metal shelves stretched in rows for as far as the eye could see, and on them objects of various shapes were systematically laid out so they might be seen from afar. Devices large and small, wooden boxes, iron crates, things that seemed to be metallic containers—some of these were only the size of a ring box, yet they were grouped together with enormous machines that looked like construction equipment and towered to the heavens. Off in the distance, there even lay a multicolored field of

flowers with what looked like leech grass. It seemed like it would take more than a thousand years to try everything here.

"According to some data, there's enough synthetic blood stockpiled here to sustain a million Nobles for a millennium. And that doesn't even take into account the million blood synthesizers here."

Satisfied at finally having someone with whom he might share his knowledge, Sergei had become quite garrulous.

"This one machine alone could supply enough blood for ten thousand people indefinitely. Incredible, isn't it? Apparently it tastes like muddy water, but if that'd been enough for them, things might've gone better between them and the human race."

Going over to the nearest shelf, Sergei slapped one of the machines on it. It was the same kind of transfusion device he'd got for Gordo. A small blood-synthesizing tank and the transfusion equipment were combined in a single unit.

"Convenient little sucker, this."

Sergei threw a switch at one end of its base, and the complicated-looking device instantly folded in on itself, compacting down to the size of a lunch bag.

"At this size, you can haul a whole bunch of these out at once. It's just like the pictures in the account I read. Leave it to the Nobility to have these closest to the door—that sure came in handy."

D remained silent, listening to the man.

Perhaps overwhelmed by the sheer volume collected here, Sergei felt surprisingly good.

"I mean, out of all this stuff, not even *you* could—"

The man turned around. On realizing that it wasn't D who stood there, it took about a second for the expression to leave his face.

So thin he called to mind a scarecrow, the man wore a helmet and combat suit. Even without seeing the bloodless visage, eyes dim and cloudy as a dead fish's made his nature clear. He was one of the Nobility's warriors. Nearly as immortal as the vampires themselves but like mindless automatons, these creatures had been chosen by the Nobility as highly valued soldiers.

"The living dead . . ."

How long had he mistaken it for D? And where had D disappeared to?

Without time to ponder these questions, Sergei stared at the ghostly pale hand stretching toward his throat. Its fingers sank into his neck. The flesh snapped open under its nails. Sergei was conscious of the blood trickling from him. His throat was seized roughly. Terror seared his brain, but at that instant, the undead soldier before him convulsed for a second, then stood bolt upright. Sergei had seen a gleaming white tip burst through the creature's heart.

The soldier crumbled, helmet, clothes and all, but without looking at the blue-gray detritus it left, Sergei turned his gaze instead to the handsome youth who was sheathing his sword.

"What the hell happened?"

At the question he'd finally managed to pose, D raised his left hand and pointed to a relatively close shelf.

"That urn? Sure, I opened it."

With the transfusion equipment over one shoulder, Sergei had taken a white china urn from the shelf and opened its lid. However, nothing had appeared. The urn had been filled with what looked like white salt crystals. Spilling some on the floor, Sergei had watched it for a while, but after there was no change he'd just let it be.

"Impossible. That's what was inside it?" said the astonished Sergei.

"Fifty of 'em to an urn," the hoarse voice responded.

Sergei looked all around them.

Where they'd been or what they'd been doing was a mystery, but from between the shelves and from the far reaches of the room pale figures were now closing on them with swaying steps.

In ancient times, some had thought the essence of a human being was salt. The Nobility had probably pursued that line of thinking with a savage diligence.

"What'll we do, D?" Sergei asked, his own face growing as pale as those of the undead soldiers as he drew the rivet gun from his hip.

"I've got what I came for. Get going."

Now that he mentioned it, D had a silver container dangling from his left hand. Though a curiosity was building in him that threatened to make him forget all else, the faces of the pale undead that'd started to come into view brought Sergei back to reality.

"Down," D said just as soon as the man had decided to do whatever the Hunter told him. He hit the ground as fast as he could, and a wave of crimson raced overhead, scoring a direct hit on the wall with the door. It was a particle cannon. The wall took the blistering ray of accelerated particles without even changing color.

The air whistled; an undead soldier in the back collapsed. D's needle of rough wood had pierced him through the heart.

Apparently, none of the other soldiers carried weapons. Unconcerned by their compatriot's demise, they mutely closed on D and Sergei.

Sergei had been about to run for the door, but he'd twisted his ankle. If he couldn't stand, he was finished. He fell over.

D had already reached the door.

When Sergei got back on his feet, cold fingers clasped his shoulder.

"Waaaah!" he screamed as he spun around. One of the faces was right in front of him.

It was pure reflex and survival instinct that brought his rivet gun up to the soldier's forehead.

Blam! The pressurized gas cap burst, firing off a three-and-a-half-ounce iron rivet at a thousand feet per second and blowing the whole back of the dead man's head out with it. Long ago, Sergei had been in a similar situation and dispatched a zombie in the exact same manner.

I did it, he thought.

But the dead man didn't fall.

Feeling like he could actually hear the bones creaking under the pressure from the fingers digging into his shoulders, Sergei let out a scream. Unexpectedly, the pain abated. Wildly shaking his shoulder free and leaping forward, Sergei turned and spied the naked blade that protruded from the chest of the undead soldier.

D had come back.

"Go," the Hunter said, pointing toward the door, then squaring off against another of the approaching soldiers. He was a placid figure with his sword lowered.

The living dead didn't know what fear was—it was just the way they'd been created. And that was why they were the ideal soldiers. However, before this powerful man standing there, quiet and beautiful, the dead grew tense. Perhaps they glimpsed in the figure of D something more fearful than death. Nonetheless, they prepared to advance.

Sergei had just reached the door and was turning back for a look. He saw D's right hand paint a gleaming arc. It mowed right through the neck of the nearest soldier and went on to remove the head of another behind him before sliding back into its sheath. The crisp clack of its guard against the scabbard seemed poorly matched to the sound of those heads rolling around on the floor. Was that the power of the source of the hoarse voice, or skillful swordsmanship based on D's superhuman instincts?

As D came running over to him, Sergei got the feeling the Hunter might lop off his own head as well, and he dove out through the open door. Crossing the rubble-strewn chamber, he squeezed out again through the crack in the giant stone. But just before doing so, he saw D lob a silver cylinder into the center of the chamber.

No sooner was he through the suffocating bottleneck than he was grabbed around the waist and carried a good fifteen feet. And as his feet touched the ground, a rumbling in the earth shook him.

Fire spouted from the giant stone. Virulent, oily flames split the rock, and the earthen fortification itself started to swell out. The instant the molecules lost their cohesion, flames shot from the ground, and stones and earth were broken into even finer pieces that erupted into the void.

Having made two more leaps that carried them into the depths of the forest, D and Sergei were soon cloaked in the dark shadows of trees cast on them by the pale glow.

"Don't tell me the whole warehouse is gonna—" Sergei began, breaking off but gazing at D with terror-filled eyes. "If you did that, it'd blow this whole neighborhood sky high!"

"I sealed the entrance," D replied, drawing a sigh of relief from Sergei.

And soon enough, true to what he'd said, the light faded and the rumblings dwindled in the distance.

"Let's go," D said, spinning around.

"Huh?"

"Before everything comes back down."

"Oh!" Sergei said, his eyes opening wide with fear and surprise.

Roughly forty seconds later, white hot rubble and other material sent up by the flames from that atomic grenade came back down in the section of forest the pair had fled, instantly transforming it into a sea of flames.

Arriving at the campsite, Sergei found D, who'd gotten there just a little bit earlier.

"What's the story? There's nothing here!"

Wondering if they had the wrong spot, Sergei looked all around, finding tracks from their wheels on the ground and signs of their camp. Nearby, a chunk of scorched stone fell, sending up white smoke. Little flames sprang up here and there.

"That bastard Juke's run off on us. Damned coward!"

"His job is transporting that cargo. He only did the natural thing," D said, sending the hem of his coat fluttering out as he deflected a piece of burning iron.

"Which way did he go?"

"That way," the hoarse voice responded, but Sergei didn't notice anything weird about its tone. With all the swiftness of a wild beast he started running in the direction D's left hand had pointed.

GASKELL APPEARS

CHAPTER 4

I

How fared the Duke of Xenon?" Baron Schuma inquired, his jeering tone drifting through the intense darkness that dominated the space.

"He botched the assignment. Not only that, but his daughter fell into the humans' hands."

The groan that bore down on the inky blackness was like the roar of a lion. However, the speaker was undoubtedly a million times fiercer than any lion, and a billion times more malevolent.

"Isn't that something," Schuma said, his voice carrying neither regret about the results nor sympathy for the duke. Naturally, what became of his daughter was no concern of the baron's. "Madame Laurencin has been slain and the Duke of Xenon's beloved daughter taken captive, all without scoring a single victory—a sad state of affairs."

"Will you go out, Baron?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

In the darkness where the shapes of people couldn't even be seen—or perhaps didn't even exist—Schuma could almost be pictured frantically waving his hands.

"Still, that's quite an embarrassing showing for someone like the Duke of Xenon. General—naturally you must've sent his daughter after the humans to exterminate them, didn't you, sir?"

"Naturally."

"Knowing that his daughter had been sent into battle, the Duke of Xenon would fight like a man possessed. You are truly wise, General," he said in a needling fashion.

"But why didn't you slay D within the castle's walls?" the baron inquired with honest puzzlement, his head tilted to one side. "He's certainly possessed of a monstrous power ill suited to his good looks. But you didn't appear to entertain an iota of interest in finishing him here, General."

"If I were to slay the Hunter in my castle, that would put an end to the festivities for which you were all assembled."

"Aha. Then we were indeed brought back to life to take care of him?"

"Why else?"

"In that case—good," the baron said in a tone that was satisfied and relieved. However, whether or not he truly meant what he said was unclear. "So, do you intend to leave the next move to the Duke of Xenon as well? At this rate, might those rascals not leave your territory?"

"They can't get out," the general said, his voice filled with a confidence as vast as the universe. "There's no one on earth who can escape my mobile domain—'the drifting land'—unless I wish it."

"Excuse me, sir," a different voice interrupted. It was Grand Duke Mehmet. "Has the general forgotten what the Hunter took from the

warehouse?" It seemed that regardless of where they were, the Nobles could keep tabs on D and Sergei's actions. "That happens to be a—"

"I know!" General Gaskell bellowed, his roar shredding the darkness. "But if you think a toy like *that* will work in Gaskell's domain, I suggest all of you sit back and watch the show a while longer."

Though Juke had set the wagon in motion to avoid the hail of deadly shrapnel from the sky, a forest fire had now replaced that threat. Flames rose on all sides as he narrowly slipped between them, but the next thing he knew, both the road ahead and the way he'd come were blocked by walls of orange.

"Got no choice now but to use the fireproof shield. But how long will it hold?"

The shield could be thought of as a kind of shroud of fireproof and heatproof fibers. Though it would envelop the wagon at the touch of a single button, it would last perhaps thirty minutes at best.

As Juke was about to press that button up in the driver's seat, a voice from inside the wagon called out, "What are you doing? Hurry up and untie me, you nasty louts!" As demanding as it was, the female voice that reached his ears was oddly sweet.

"Oh, is our little flower-picker up? According to what Sergei said, she was supposed to sleep for another full day."

"Will you not untie me? Then I shall do it myself."

In the time it took Juke's jaw to drop, a tremendous impact and sounds of destruction were transmitted through his body.

"Got free, did she?"

As he was turning to look, she drifted down from above with a splendid bouquet of colors and sat right beside him. The leech-grass blossom she pulled from her brow was thrown down on the ground. Juke's hand was too slow in going for his pistol, and the girl's cute little fingers drove right against his throat. Her fingernails were sharp as razors. One flick of them would slice his head clean off—Juke was certain of that much.

Taking his hand away from his gun, he asked, "You gonna kill me?"

"Stop the fire," the little girl—Lady Ann—ordered him.

"Sorry, but that just ain't possible," Juke replied. "I'm not like the Nobility. I don't have any powers or gadgets to put out a wildfire like this at the drop of a hat. Do you?"

"Foolish human," the lovely little girl spat endearingly before muttering, "Where is Father? Will he not come to my rescue?"

Her forlorn state stirred a strange sympathy in Juke's bosom.

"It'd be nice if he did, but let's consider the possibility he doesn't. Get back in the wagon."

"Consider for a moment your station. Are you in any position to give *me* orders?"

The tips of her fingernails pressed a little deeper into his throat. Juke

could feel the blood trickling down his skin.

"Point taken. But if you kill me, you think you could make it out of this blaze alone? There's already a sea of flames all around us."

The girl fell silent. The same countenance from which dignity had fairly wafted was now clearly shaken, with waves of terror rippling across it.

"Are you really a little Noble girl?" Juke asked, but as soon as he spoke, he wished he hadn't.

Driving her pretty little nails in even deeper, the girl trembled with rage. "You shall regret that affront—while your body burns in the flames!"

An arm that seemed so fragile it would break at the merest touch easily hoisted Juke into the air. With such strength, she could undoubtedly hurl him out into the depths of the fiery inferno with no effort at all.

However, she wasn't able to throw him. Her tiny frame had been pierced by a terribly eerie aura—every inch of her ached as if she'd been impaled. The pain was only imagined, but Ann sensed something, and the fingertips she touched to her cheek came away covered in fresh crimson blood. This person possessed a supernatural aura so strong it had an effect on her body that was physically impossible.

Still holding Juke up high, Lady Ann leapt down to the ground. Standing in the grass, the girl turned and saw a pair of silhouettes backed by the blistering heat of the crimson flames.

Lady Ann was left speechless. It wasn't due to the ghastly aura radiating from one of the two figures—a young man in black who held a bizarre, polelike device. Even with his eyes shut, his beauty had stolen her soul.

"Put him down," D said.

Ann didn't move. She didn't even intend to offer him any resistance. Her foe's handsome features still had her entranced.

Said foe quickly moved forward. The instant she noticed this and prepared to counterattack, the lovely Noble girl took a lightning-swift blow to the side that knocked her unconscious on the spot.

"Tie her up," D ordered Sergei, who was behind him. He then pointed the device in his right hand at the flames before them.

Although it looked just like a metallic pole, its end suddenly sent out new, thinner pipes that spread out like a parabolic antenna. If it was an antenna, it lacked the outer skin—it was merely the frame. Anyone who looked straight into that skeletal projection would've blinked at the bizarre scene they saw there.

A scene? Yes, a scene is exactly what it was. The whole interior of the antenna was spread with darkness. And glittering in the depths of that darkness were stars.

From where Sergei and Juke were, the antenna merely looked like a casing, but turning it toward the roaring flames, D threw a lever on its handle. Flames burned in the darkness of that tiny universe—an exact duplicate of the raging inferno that lay before the group. Without warning,

the miniature flames disappeared, as did those on the ground.

Sergei and Juke voiced their surprise.

In an area a hundred feet wide, the flames had vanished, trees, soil, and all. Although the remaining fire burned out of control, any trees and grass the deadly tongues of flame might've spread to had vanished without a trace.

"Is that a 'vacuum cleaner'?" Sergei asked in amazement, but no one answered him.

To be more precise, it was called a "teleportation disposal system." With this simple device, Nobles could exercise their characteristic fastidiousness after a battle was done, using it to hurl the sprawling corpses of their fallen troops and the wreckage of their weapons into the vacuum of outer space.

Was this what'd been in the container D had brought out of the warehouse?

"Look at him go, General," Baron Schuma said teasingly. "With that, he'll whisk your entire domain away to make his escape. It's hard to believe he's blind. Indeed, there's something different about this man called D. Something fearful."

"I suspect this would be a good time to dispatch someone important to slay D, wouldn't it?" Grand Duke Mehmet solemnly said.

"May I intrude?" a female voice suddenly interrupted, her tone draining the darkness itself of its hues.

"If it isn't Dr. Gretchen!" Baron Schuma and Grand Duke Mehmet both exclaimed, not only due to the ring in her voice, but also because they were overwhelmed by the gorgeous image it conjured up. Although they'd referred to her as "Doctor," she sounded like a grand diva at an opera in the Capital.

"Up until now I've been watching quite intently, but I feel my time has finally come."

Perhaps her dazzling voice overwhelmed the fiends, for none of them spoke. No, that wasn't exactly right—through the darkness, they broadcast shock and fear by turns. But what could frighten these monsters that even D's left hand had to admire? There was only one answer—this woman. Dr. Gretchen.

"Dear me, it's grown so quiet. Am I to believe, then, that none of you has any objections?"

There was no reply.

The doctor's voice was bright, like a flower, as she said, "I shall take that as a no, then. Off I go, General."

"Wait."

At that grave voice, a certain something flowed through the darkness. Relief.

"Oh, whatever is it?"

"I shall go," Gaskell said.

The darkness stirred. Even Dr. Gretchen couldn't hide her surprise.

"So, you're finally taking the field? I get the feeling it's still a bit too early for that," said Grand Duke Mehmet.

"Indeed. It looks like the rest of us will have been brought back to life for nothing."

Needless to say, this sarcastic remark came from Baron Schuma.

Out in the darkness, a presence was felt. General Gaskell had risen. That in itself was enough to draw cries of pain from the woman and the men—the air about him was that intense.

A wounded lion still lurked outside in the form of the Duke of Xenon. Lady Ann was also the Hunter's foe.

How will you face them all, D?

II

The wagon ignored the fire as it raced forward. Every time D's vacuum cleaner sucked up the flames, their safety zone grew steadily. And when they finally reached the road, D raced down it on his horse.

Seeing D riding right beside them, Juke clucked his tongue as he worked the reins. Even the flames themselves were afraid to fall near the gorgeous Hunter—and he was blind. The man had finally realized this while watching the Hunter, who made no move to brush away the burning leaves and branches raining down all around them.

"Looks like we'll make it out, eh?" the transporter remarked, allowing some wishful thinking to escape because they had such a man on their side.

"We're still in his domain," D said, the distant flames reflecting off his face.

"But we'll probably get out of it soon. Domain of the great General Gaskell or not, it can't go on forever."

"Don't forget that his territory can shift."

"That's what I mean—isn't there any limit to it?"

"There is."

"Then we should be fine. Before long we'll get through this, and sooner or later we'll get out. All our cargo is vacuum sealed, at any rate."

"This is Gaskell's domain."

"Hey!" Juke said with a scowl. "Sometimes I have to wonder about you. Whose side are you on, anyway?"

Realizing how that might be taken, the man grew pale a second later. But D didn't seem to mind at all.

"Incoming."

"Huh?" Juke said in reply because the voice had been so terribly hoarse.

"You probably know this already," the same tone continued, "but an incredibly powerful opponent is closing on you. Odds are it's the lord of the land."

"General Gaskell?" Juke cried out.

“Calm yourself! Just calm down. You that scared of him?”

Baited by the hoarse voice, Juke got a strange expression on his face as he replied, “You could say that.”

“He’s not *that* scary. After all, you came into his lands and you’ll be leaving again. You can’t know how scared those who’ve laid down roots here are.”

That was right on the mark, and Juke twisted his lips and said no more.

“Stop the wagon,” D commanded, in his own voice.

Though Juke looked at him in surprise, the man didn’t say anything.

The shock of the sudden stop made Sergei stick his head out the window and ask what’d happened, but on seeing D jump down, he too fell silent.

The fire had lost some of its strength, but flames burned on all sides of them. Riding up thirty feet ahead of the wagon, D took the vacuum cleaner and pointed it all around, quickly creating a clearing about fifty yards in diameter. He then swung his right arm and the cleaner, which looked like it would blow away on the first gust of wind, went sailing thirty feet right on target, landing on Juke’s lap in the driver’s seat.

“Stay out of this.”

At D’s quiet but forceful declaration, both Juke and Sergei merely nodded. No matter what happened next, they realized they wouldn’t be able to so much as lift a finger.

It was perhaps a minute later that there was the thunder of approaching hoofbeats from nowhere in particular. D turned to the left.

“Ah, so he’s coming by a road that doesn’t exist? Just what you’d expect from the master of the domain.”

The flames vanished instantly. Stands of trees bent to either side as if they were made of rubber. And between them a team of six black horses clomped into the clearing, pulling a carriage behind them.

“Oh, my,” was the cry that escaped D’s left hand.

Everything about them was huge. The black horses were twice as big as normal ones, standing about ten feet tall from the ground up to the top of their manes. If used in combat, they would’ve been fearsome weapons. And the carriage drawn by these massive steeds was proportioned accordingly. Reflecting the distant flames on its surface, its body was made of steel. There wasn’t a single unadorned part on it—the steel was completely covered with fiendish carvings. To be more precise, they included the faces of the deceased still wearing clearly agonized expressions. Each was an incredible rictus, eyes bulging in search of the salvation that would never come and tongues hanging out. To the common person, this carriage looked like the trusty vehicle the grim reaper used to carry off the deceased, or perhaps a reflection of the living fires of hell that awaited them.

Stillness held sway in the world. Off in the distance, the flames continued to burn out of control, coupled with the sound of trees splitting.

The howling of winds brought by the fire never died down. Yet Juke and Sergei both realized they were in the midst of a perfect silence. All five of their senses had been numbed and were beginning to play tricks on them. Or perhaps the world itself was going mad.

"Well, I'll be . . ." D's left hand groaned. It could've just as easily been taken for a cry of pain. "Such a ghastly aura . . . It flies in the face of nature. So this is General Gaskell—a Greater Noble second only to the Sacred Ancestor?"

It was almost as if it knew how the carriage's occupant would make his entrance.

The creak of old-fashioned hinges broke the silence. *And yet there was no sound.* Such a quiet battlefield. At the moment the carriage door opened, a broad step came out under the portal, which was over three feet off the ground. And what then leaned out could only be described as a black cloud.

The first thing that came into view was an enormous head—which didn't have a single hair on it. A silver mask hid half of the face. And perhaps to ward off the deadly rays of the sun, the remainder of the face and head was shrouded in black. From the neck down he wore a pitch-black cape, but beneath it the shape of his powerful shoulders was distinctly visible, like a minor mountain. Half of his cape was tossed aside, revealing a black jacket embroidered in bizarre patterns with golden thread. His right hand was held behind his back, out of sight, but from it stretched the hilt of an all-black longsword—though it might've been better to call it a greatsword.

As a black pillar of a leg came down on it, the iron step creaked. The gigantic form was gradually revealed in a manner reminiscent of the way genies appeared from bottles in ancient legends. Treading the last step, the giant lumbered down to the ground. As the massive figure standing more than six and a half feet tall stared down at D, less than fifteen feet lay between them.

Was this the same Greater Noble that Baron Schuma and the others had mocked back at his castle? What stood before D was indeed nothing less than a genie, impossibly huge and with the whole world in his grip. And what should that genie do but bend over with his right hand against his chest in a respectful bow, like a vassal paying homage to his king.

"So, you are D, I take it? I've heard of you. I am General Gaskell," he said, his tone equally courteous.

In response, the blind young warrior also adorned in the color of the darkness replied in his usual fearless tone, "I'm D."

At that instant, sound returned to the world. Death was transformed into life.

"Ah!" Gaskell said, for now it was his turn to gasp. "You're everything I've heard and more. It stands to reason that Madame Laurencin was slain and the Duke of Xenon failed to measure up. Your average country Nobility could come at you in packs and still not have the slightest effect."

“My job right now is guarding that wagon,” D said. “Stand back and let us pass—or else.”

If anyone else had been there to hear it, the threat would’ve sounded so reckless it wouldn’t have been surprising for them to go mad out of sheer despair. It was essentially a declaration of war.

However, the instant the words reached the ears of the paralyzed Juke and Sergei, involuntary cries of appreciation rang out in the depths of their hearts. They understood. D, the gorgeous warrior, was not afraid. For he, too, was a fiend.

“I shall not let you pass,” General Gaskell replied after some consideration. “As for why that is, it appears the goal of those of us who’ve been brought back to life is to slay you.”

“It appears?” said the hoarse voice.

“You come after me without even knowing why?” asked D. His eyes were still closed.

Gaskell’s expression—or the half of it that was visible—was tinged with suffering.

D asked, “Why have you come back, General Gaskell?”

“That I do know. It was a promise made to me by the Sacred Ancestor.”

“A promise?”

“Yes. I can’t recall it too well, but before I was destroyed, the Sacred Ancestor and I made an agreement about my revival. My stipulation was that he would be sure to bring me back to the world of the living. The timing of that revival I left to the Sacred Ancestor. However, at that time, the Sacred Ancestor added his own condition. Aha!” he exclaimed, his already intense expression twisting with glee. Just one look at it would be enough to make birds fall from the sky and lions faint dead away. “Now I remember! Yes, the Sacred Ancestor placed a condition on my revival. That after I’d been brought back to life, I had to do one task for him. Ah, now, for the first time, I understand. That’s what this is. Surely it must be to dispose of you.”

Sheathed in black, the general’s right hand went for the hilt of his longsword. Then he knit his brow.

“But, wait a moment. I was sure I . . .”

“I had heard General Gaskell had discovered a way to return to life through his own power,” D said as if offering the words he sought. “Why did you rely on the Sacred Ancestor’s power instead of using that?”

Perhaps he was searching for the answer to D’s query, or he might’ve sought the solution to some puzzle of his own, but Gaskell was covered in a tense silence from head to toe. Lips thick enough to crush a rock finally spat the words that came from him like a creak. “Ah, yes. By my own power, I wasn’t able to determine the timing of my revival . . . I had no idea when I might come back to life. However, the Sacred Ancestor could have it occur whenever he wished. When I agreed to this, it was with the wish that I come back as soon as possible—within a millennium at least.”

“Was it the same with the other Nobles?”

“Probably, although I haven’t asked them about it. But none of them would’ve known how to revive themselves.”

Nevertheless, Baron Schuma, Madame Laurencin, and the Duke of Xenon had all come back to life, assembled under Gaskell, and were now fighting tooth and nail over who would face D. Had all of them also received promises from the Sacred Ancestor, with slaying D as the condition?

"What do you intend to do if you slay me?" D asked.

"I'm not entirely sure," Gaskell replied, folding his arms. "And I can't think of a reason why. Why would that be?"

A faint, pained grin flashed across D's lips. He'd never had anyone who was trying to kill him agonize over not knowing the reason for doing so.

"Well, stay out of our way," D told him.

"I'm afraid I can't do that. I have a promise to uphold. Particularly to him, of all people. Well, so be it. Once I've dealt with you, I suppose the reason for all this shall come to me."

There was the sound of steel skimming by his chest. The general's long, long blade reflected the distant flames, yet gleamed starkly white.

Despite the situation, D's hand didn't go for the sword on his back. What did his closed eyes behold?

The general moved forward. Although the step seemed to carry his entire weight, surprisingly enough it didn't make a sound.

The blade of his sword fell. D met it head on. No one had seen him draw—not even the general. But with the most exquisite sound in the world the general's longsword and D's blade locked together.

"Ah!" someone cried out in surprise. Did that gasp escape from Juke or Sergei, or was it the Hunter's left hand?

D's right knee had been driven to the ground.

The general's black face grinned. This wasn't about technique. He simply pushed with all his might, trying to overwhelm D with sheer strength like some primitive combatant.

III

However, within the general's grin was an astonishment even he couldn't hide.

"You've done well to withstand a blow from General Gaskell," he said, and the surprise came out in his voice. From the very bottom of his heart he praised the young man he wished to slice in two. "Every swordsman, every knight, every single warrior who ever came from the Capital I reduced to dust with a single blow. No one ever stopped me. D, your name will not be forgotten!"

As he spoke, his right arm bulged. With the power of just one arm, the general intended to bisect both D and his sword.

"What?" Gaskell said, a dubious expression skimming across his face.

Rising a bit on his toes, he put more weight behind the weapon. His expression became one of clear surprise. He hadn't cut through D's blade. And D wasn't even being pushed down. To the contrary, the pressure he

was exerting on the massive blade from below was gradually but unmistakably driving the general's enormous form back to its starting position. It simply wasn't possible that a mere blind hunter of Nobility could match him in strength!

"Holy shit!"

It was Juke and Sergei who cried out, their eyes bulging, but Gaskell himself was thinking the very same thing.

D had just stood up straight.

"It can't be . . . Such power . . . Could it be that you're—"

It was at precisely that instant that the voice and the massive sword flew upward. The giant had taken a huge leap back. A flash of light closed on him. Just as it skimmed across his chest and pulled away, the general made the earth tremble with his landing. He'd lost his former lightness. And by way of compensation, he'd been left with a gash through the chest of his jacket.

"You are truly a monster," General Gaskell muttered. Who could've ever imagined him saying such a thing? "You pose a threat to me with naught but a sword. Now, allow me to do what I do best!"

The sky darkened. The bolt of lightning that came down from the heavens without any foreshadowing roar brought a white streak right down on top of D. Fifty million volts should've been enough to char even a member of the vampiric Nobility right to the bone.

The world became white, then blue. And in that light, an even stronger blue glittered—the pendant on D's chest as he charged forward.

"You scoundrel!"

The enormous sword he brought down with that cry rebounded high, and the general didn't even have time to flee the follow-up blow, which pierced his heart.

"Aaaah!"

A howl of pain like that of a great beast shook heaven and earth.

D had already pulled his sword back. He realized the general had narrowly managed to block it with his body, but he was in no position to parry the coup de grâce.

The ground quaked. Although D's stance wasn't disrupted at all, the general staggered badly. Flames erupted from the depths of the forest.

When the tip of D's sword shot forward after a second's hesitation, General Gaskell was already sailing through the air. Once he'd landed in the driver's seat of his carriage, his six black horses tore up the ground. Picking up speed, they ran for dear life back the way they'd come.

"How embarrassing for our general," someone's voice said. "A bit more and he'd have broken through that lightproof armor. Such fearsome swordsmanship!"

"What's more—D is giving chase!"

Having already turned to look, General Gaskell realized as much. For all the vaunted speed of his synthetic horses, D was closing on them with his eyes shut. Even as searing pain wracked Gaskell's chest, his heart was

bleached by fear and awe. Taking up the whip, he lashed away. The horses rapidly increased their speed.

So close he could've reached out and touched the back of the carriage, D rapidly began to fall further and further back. Leaving the now-halted D behind it, the black-as-night carriage raced off with the wind swirling in its wake.

Returning to the wagon, D was greeted by the pale faces of Juke and Sergei. Having watched a battle that aroused reactions beyond the normal human range—such as being glad that he'd survived or congratulating him on a good fight—their brains had been numbed.

"W-would you like a back rub or something?" Sergei finally managed to say as D was reaching for the handle to climb up into the driver's seat.

"No, *I* shall see to his back," said a luminescent tone that caused even D to turn.

Sergei gasped.

There by the side of the wagon, looking up at D, was Lady Ann.

Juke and Sergei knew what fate lay in store for them—they gleaned it from the surpassingly feverish gaze she trained on D. And they also decided to take a certain course of action on seeing how the love-struck girl melted in rapture, while her eyes still burned like a flame.

"I was awakened by the general's aura," said Lady Ann. The way she spoke was so cute and even carefree without being showy, it made her sound all the more earnest. "And I was treated to quite a show. A display of your fighting prowess. Dealing the great Gaskell a wound while blinded—that's most impressive."

Exchanging glances with Juke, Sergei held his gun by his hip.

"I—I've become quite smitten with you, D."

"Stop."

This seemed like a brusque way to reply to a profession of love; it was directed, of course, at Sergei. He was just about to pull back the trigger on the pistol he had trained on Lady Ann.

"Keep out of this, D," Juke said, trying to mediate. But after having spoken, he had to wonder if the Hunter was merely pretending to be blind. "If we bring this little girl along with us, I think it'll mean nothing but trouble. We'd be a whole hell of a lot better off getting rid of her right now."

"I said to take her with us."

"But she's dangerous!" Sergei said. "You must've seen the look in her eyes, right? Uh, sorry, I mean *we* can see it. She's completely in love with you. And that's sure to cause problems!"

"Oh, that I am," the innocent girl sneered at the two grown men. "I've merely fallen in love with *him*. The two of you are my enemies—that much is unchanged. However, please feel at ease. I won't do anything—if that is D's bidding."

"You think we'd trust you, you little idiot?" Sergei spat.

“Do as you wish. There’s only one person in the whole world I need to believe in me.”

The girl turned her blossomlike smile in D’s direction.

“We’re taking her with us,” D said.

“Oh, joy!” Ann exclaimed, clasping her hands together before her chest.

Ignoring her, the Hunter continued, “You’re still of use to us. But let me be clear—you’re not to interfere in any way. Do anything at all to slow our progress, and I’ll destroy you on the spot.”

“And I shall be too happy to be cut down,” the girl said, swathed in such an aura of joy that even death itself was no longer distasteful. This girl of less than ten would gladly welcome death if the one she loved delivered it.

As Juke and Sergei looked at each other, D called over to them in a quiet tone, “Then it’s settled. Let’s go.”

†

“They’ll be out of your territory soon,” Grand Duke Mehmet said, referring to D and the others. “Though the Duke of Xenon remains, his beloved daughter has been taken hostage, and that must substantially restrict his course of action. All the more so because she’s fallen in love with D.”

“What he says is true,” Dr. Gretchen said in a somewhat high tone, as if she’d known all along something like this would happen. “A woman blinded by love belongs to the object of her affection. There is neither friend nor foe. We’ve made a new enemy.”

“The Duke of Xenon will have to take responsibility,” General Gaskell said, his tone almost a groan.

He lay at length on a sofa. The doctors and nurses who’d slavishly seen to his treatment until a few minutes earlier had left with their medical equipment. As for the effects of the treatment—there were almost none. It was as if D’s deadly blade had utterly robbed the gigantic General Gaskell’s cells of their regenerative abilities, with his wound refusing to close and searing pain assailing him relentlessly. Yet for all this, his voice was calm. And though sweat welled on his parchment-pale face, his black sun protection hid it from the eyes of others. Yet he remained sprawled on the sofa.

“May I intrude?” Dr. Gretchen inquired.

“You may.”

No sooner had he replied than a slim figure stood beside his sofa like a wraith.

“You seem to be in pain, General.”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” Gaskell said, turning his face away in a snit. While his defeat might be common knowledge, he couldn’t very well show any weakness. And this woman in particular didn’t seem to suit General Gaskell’s nature.

“You mustn’t try to hide it from me. I am a specialist in that field, General.”

“I am well aware of that. You are one of God’s mistakes—a woman who never should’ve been born. How many of the millions you were supposed to save did you send instead to their reward?”

“How uncouth of you,” the shadowy figure replied, putting her hand to her mouth as she laughed. “All of that was part of an effort to make the world of the Nobility even better. What are a million humans or two in comparison?”

“Too true,” the general said, smiling wryly. “But after you fled, the bodies of Nobility who should’ve died but couldn’t were discovered in your discarded research facility. Roughly fifty thousand of them—it came as little surprise you were sentenced to the most excruciating punishment.”

“Ah, if only I’d burned that facility down,” the shadowy figure laughed. “It was only right the Sacred Ancestor executed that painful death sentence himself. Even my own techniques of euthanasia wouldn’t serve me. I still shudder to think back on that torment. Ah!”

The shadowy figure began to quake. It took about a minute before her struggles with those memories were at an end.

“Is it not time that I had a turn, General?” the one they called Doctor asked in a tone choked with cruelty.

“No.”

“Why ever not?”

“I don’t need to answer that.”

“Do you think that once I’ve caught that little traitor I’ll perform vivisection on her?”

“I don’t care if you dissect her, but I can’t have you turning the Duke of Xenon against us.”

“Goodness! Do you think I would ever embark on such a foolish course? Just watch. I shall take care of that little witch and earn the thanks of the Duke of Xenon, and then slay D and the other troublemakers with my own two hands. Just between the two of us, do you think any of the others can do the same things I can?”

They could probably never match your cruelty, the general muttered in his heart of hearts, but he said nothing. On further consideration, he added, *And that is probably for the best*.

“You can’t go,” he told her.

“Oh, but I want to do this so badly. I wonder if you might allow me to try something. I should like to tear that Hunter to pieces with my bare hands. If you were to give me your permission, I would show you my gratitude.”

“Your gratitude?”

“Like so.”

A delicate hand touched Gaskell’s chest.

“Oh!” the most notorious Noble on earth gasped.

The pain from the wound D’s sword had dealt him had suddenly

vanished without a trace.

THE WITCH DESCENDS

CHAPTER 5

I

Up ahead of the wagon they saw a new stand of trees and a trail through the forest that was clearly another road.

"How about it, D? Is that it?" Juke asked from where he sat in the driver's seat holding the reins, and his voice was taut with expectation.

"It appears so."

D's reply carried two meanings at once—this was a road made by human hands, and they'd exited Gaskell's domain.

"Yippee!" Juke exclaimed, swinging the reins wildly and letting Sergei know back in the living quarters that their escape had been successful.

However, they'd been racing nonstop through the forest for three hours, guided by D's instinct alone. Dusk had already begun to settle over the world.

With Juke and Sergei's cries of delight, the wagon jostled onto the new road.

"I remember now. This is the way to Krakow for sure."

This time the horses didn't seem afraid, their iron-shod hooves pounding the earth, and before long they arrived at the palisade of a village they all recognized. Leaning out of the wooden watchtower to see who was doing what was the same yellow-shirted young man with a rifle that they'd met before.

"We're transporters," Juke said by way of introduction, and the man showed him a pearly smile.

"Hold on a minute. It's just—" he began, knitting his brow. "Haven't I met you somewhere before? And fairly recently, too?"

"Could be," Juke said, shooting him a wry grin.

The palisade gates opened without any problem and the wagon was met by the cries of villagers. Children came running out of houses that'd been shrouded in fog before, and carts loaded with villagers and crops bustled incessantly up and down the street.

"What a relief!" Juke sighed, revealing his true feelings without qualm.

Having given him the reins, D sat motionless with his eyes shut, but once the wagon had pulled into the central square and impatient villagers pressed in on all sides, he climbed down from the vehicle with a grace inconceivable from a blind man.

"Take me with you!" a sweet but earnest tone cried out from the wagon's interior.

"A little help, D," was the appeal that came in due course from Sergei, who was keeping an eye on Lady Ann. "Gordo's no good to us now, so I'll have to assist Juke. Would you keep an eye on this little she-devil?"

D turned around quickly, as if to say, *Just leave her be*.

"Somebody, please help me!" a shrill voice suddenly shouted. "I'm from the village of Ushki. These transport-party men abducted me!"

A stir went through the foremost rank of villagers. Many of the gazes that fell on Juke and D were clearly tinged with suspicion.

"Hey! Shut up, you little idiot!" Sergei said in an attempt to get her to stop.

"Ah! What are you doing?" the girl cried. "How disgusting! Take your hands off of me!"

The grumbling spread through more of the crowd.

D turned and knocked on the door to the living quarters, saying, "Get down here."

"Gladly!" Lady Ann cried out, her tone so contented, in fact, that she seemed to have missed the sternness in the Hunter's tone.

"How about the ropes?" Sergei asked.

"Take them off."

Given the crowd's distrust, if she had emerged from the wagon tied up, the party would surely have been attacked as the worst sort of deviants.

"Count yourself lucky, little Noble girl—I'm gonna untie you now."

"Such ignorance—you truly are a simpleton," the girl laughed haughtily.

"What?" Sergei shouted angrily, but a second later, that anger turned to surprise. "Why, you little devil—you snapped our ropes!"

"I could've escaped at any time. After killing you, that is. The only reason I didn't do so was because I didn't wish to be parted from my love."

From the door of the living quarters the little girl dressed in a gorgeous array of colors leapt down next to D, while the villagers let out what could've been either gasps or sighs. The sounds spread through the crowd like ripples across the water's surface, and all the villagers appeared spellbound. As innocent as ever, the girl—Lady Ann—looked around at the foolish people and smiled dazzlingly.

"Everyone looks upon us with such envy, beloved," she laughed. "Now, shall we retire to the refreshing shade of a stand of trees or a bed of green grass stroked by the evening breeze?"

To all appearances she was a girl of ten. However, no one laughed when she spoke like a grown temptress. But look. A new expression was rising on the faces of the villagers—a dark shadow of terror. For they had guessed what Lady Ann really was.

"She's a Noble," someone said, and everyone nodded in unison.

"It's a Noble!"

"A Noble!"

"Is that young fella one, too?"

"He's gotta be Nobility."

"Definitely."

"No doubt about it."

As they repeated the same words over and over, the villagers tried to convince themselves. Spears and scythes kept stashed for use against invaders were surreptitiously passed around, and stake-launching guns were cocked. The gray-haired crone, the housewife in the baggy apron, the

children in the patchwork clothing all chanted their certainty with weapons in hand and stared at the pair.

The mob inched forward. Neither Juke nor Sergei could move. They knew the slightest provocation could send ordinary villagers into a crazed frenzy.

"It's gotta be."

"Gotta be."

"Gotta be!"

The voices advanced. Then halted.

A gust of admiration and fear sailed across the faces of Juke and Sergei, for D had gone into motion at the same time. This alone had been enough to freeze the movements of more than a hundred villagers. D walked along as if nothing had happened, and just as he was about to collide with the foremost rank of villagers—the mob split right down the middle. Villagers who'd just programmed themselves for slaughter forgot all about it and stepped aside. D went without a word down the path they made for him. Lovely as a blossom, the girl followed along behind him, and before long they'd gone off into the twilight, though the exquisite sight didn't fade from the villagers' eyes for the longest time.

Not far to the east of the square was a little forest. A narrow brook flowed through it. The faint light of evening lent a final hint of blue to the water that flowed there.

"It looks like it's going to be a wonderful night, don't you think?" Ann said, following about fifteen feet behind D. Multicolored wildflowers were clutched to her chest. Stopping to pick every one she found was what'd put her so far behind him.

"I hope a lot of stars come out," she continued. "So many more than usual. Oh, dear!"

Without so much as a glance at the jubilant Ann, D had lain down in the deepest part of the forest.

Quickly running over, Ann's color changed as she peered down at the handsome young man.

"Whatever's wrong?"

"If you're gonna make a run for it, now's your chance. He can't move."

Those hoarse words put a grim look in Ann's eyes.

Descending from the Nobility, dhampirs could operate by day or night, though occasionally the bill for that came due in precisely this form. They were both human and Noble—and those two bloodlines were at war, suddenly sending fatigue far beyond what was ordinary through their whole body. They would lose consciousness, their limbs would grow motionless, and all their vital signs would drop to their absolute lowest limits. They would essentially be comatose. Not even the dhampir in question knew how long it would last. It was up to fate.

"Excuse me—but who are you?" Ann inquired in a sharp tone. Needless to say, her query was aimed at the source of the hoarse voice.

"Now, this is a surprise. You're more interested in me than you are in

getting away?"

"I have no intention of fleeing. I'm now doing everything in my power for that man . . . though he's terribly frightening. Even having come this far with him, I couldn't hold his hand. There is no way he could ever love me. But that matters not, as I love him. At any rate, who are you?"

"Think of me as someone he's stuck with, if you like."

Trying to get a peek at D's left hand, Lady Ann leaned forward. She'd knelt down on his right side.

D's left hand caught her by the throat.

"Ah—just as I suspected . . ."

"Keep away," a rusty voice commanded, and D shoved Ann back.

Though she landed on her derrière, she quickly righted herself. Not surprisingly, anger burned in her eyes, but the moment she looked at D it immediately faded.

"Why are you so callous? I mean you no harm at all. I merely wished to learn where that unpleasant voice is coming from."

"You hear that?" D said to the hand resting near his solar plexus.

"Well, she needn't bother," the hoarse voice replied.

"Dear me!" Ann said, her eyes going wide. "It's some kind of unknown monstrosity, just as I suspected. That must be most troubling. I shall rid you of it now."

Her graceful form burning with a sense of purpose, Ann stood up.

"Hey! Knock it off. It'd be in your best interest to just forget it and get the hell out of here as fast as you can. He's using you to keep your father in check, you know."

"I already knew as much," Ann said, circling around to D's feet. "And it doesn't bother me a whit. If my beloved can make use of me, that's all I could ever want. Could it be that you take exception to being linked to my love?"

"I suppose you could say that."

"How ungrateful of you," Ann said, her whole face flushed with anger. "He won't have anything to do with me—though my heart burns for him—yet *you*, who don't even like him, have attached yourself to him and cause him all manner of trouble! I simply must separate the two of you."

Ann's right hand approached D's left. In it she clutched a yellow wildflower.

"What are you doing?"

While it was unclear whether or not D heard this bizarre exchange, he remained motionless and kept his eyes shut. It didn't even seem like he was breathing.

Staring intently at the talking left hand, Ann soon gave a decisive nod, saying, "Here!"

The cut end of the stalk stuck out of the back of the hand. And although it was an ordinary flower, it was driven so deep into D's hand it seemed like it would poke right out the other side.

Just then, an awful cry of pain rang out.

“What’ve you done, you little bitch? Don’t you know what I do for him? Oh, the pain! All my strength is leaving me!”

“I enjoyed doing that,” Ann said, putting one hand over her mouth for a conceited laugh. She was indeed a daughter of the Nobility—that and nothing less.

As she stood with a smile that would’ve left anyone staring in rapture, the yellow bloom before her swiftly took on another hue. First light brown, then red—actually, crimson.

Another roar of agony went up, and as if in response, a change came over the left hand. Its healthy skin tone faded, leaving it a color reminiscent of wax. Something like white steam erupted from its pores.

When that had finished Lady Ann smiled thinly. From the wrist up D’s left hand was withered and desiccated, having been transformed into a veritable mummy’s hand.

“The flower I just picked was another variety of parasitic plant. And now the interloper is no more.”

Smiling lovingly at the slumbering D, the girl said, “You are mine now. Tee-hee, I wonder what Father would do if only he could see us.”

And then she suddenly seemed to realize something.

“Ah, that’s right! If Father were to come now—no! My love must be hidden.”

Ann quickly looked all around, her cute little face colored by fretfulness. Before long she nodded to herself, and with a tense expression she hadn’t exhibited up until now, she left D’s side, went about six feet away, and began to plant the flowers clutched to her chest one by one all around the Hunter. Just like a barrier to shield his body.

"A flower fortress," Lady Ann muttered.

After she'd finished planting about twenty of them, she snuggled by D's side. There was a gleam of passion in her eyes.

"I am about to betray my father for your sake. I believe I'm entitled to receive at least this much by way of compensation."

And then, the lovely but fearsome girl brought her lips closer to D's face.

II

If someone possessing a balanced mind had seen it, it would've looked like a scene of sweet love. However, Ann's wish was not to be fulfilled.

The earth moved with rapid tremors, and before she knew it, it rose in waves in a spot some twenty to thirty feet away. Suddenly, an armored individual pushed his way up through rock-laden, thick black soil.

"Father!"

"There's no cause for alarm. I've been worried about you, Lady Ann!"

Though the microphone ruined his voice somewhat, it was still filled with his feelings for his daughter.

"All I could think about was rescuing you as soon as possible, but considering that young man's abilities, I had to proceed with great caution. This is the same man who even managed to cut through my armor! Are you surprised to learn there was something that could make even your father faint hearted?"

"No," Ann replied, shaking her head. She, too, was speaking from the heart. "That's only natural when dealing with him. Even if you had fled with your tail between your legs, Father, I still wouldn't have been surprised."

The Duke of Xenon's reaction was terribly ambiguous. He sensed that his daughter wasn't the same girl he had known.

"Ann, are you—"

"Might I ask you to be so good as to leave, Father?" Ann said, gazing intently at the area corresponding to the duke's eyes. "If possible, I'd like you to kindly swear to never again appear before me or him."

"Are you feeling okay, Ann?"

"I've never felt better in all my life."

"Hmm—and if I said I couldn't do that?"

"Yes, there would be trouble. Even though you are my father."

"Would you destroy me?"

"Yes."

Such an easy conversation it was. And at the same time, such a mind-numbing one.

"You're presuming that I would allow you to destroy me, are you not?"

"No."

The man in the exoskeleton was stunned by her flat reply. No, he was positively dumbfounded.

“By my oath—do you love him that much?”

“Yes. I watched him do battle as he fought off the great general blinded. Could it be that you also had a similar encounter unbeknownst to me, Father?”

“I suffered a defeat.”

“I might’ve guessed—oh, but he’s such an awesome individual,” Ann said, her voice trembling. No, her whole body quaked. And the young girl congratulated herself on her feelings of love. She hadn’t yet noticed the desire those same feelings carried.

“Lady Ann, won’t you come to your senses?” The Duke of Xenon’s voice suddenly dropped as he continued, “You are my treasure. If someone else is going to take you from me—”

“You’d rather destroy me yourself? Oh, ho! Could you do that, Father? After the way you loved me so?”

Ann’s words were launched like arrows of derision. Apparently they struck the Duke of Xenon in a vital point, for he let out a low groan and then fell silent.

Just then, there was the sound of voices and footsteps approaching from off in the distance. Suspicious of the rumbling in the earth the duke had caused, the villagers had come running.

“Ann, I will only ask you once more. Step aside.”

“And I will only tell you this once more—I respectfully decline.”

Her hand rose, and a pure white bloom flew at her armored father. Almost all of her flowers had been planted around D, but it was one of three she had left. Astonishingly enough, it didn’t bounce off when it struck the armor, but rather adhered to it. And in the blink of an eye, what should run across the surface of the armor but something like roots!

It was a second later that the armored giant dropped to one knee.

“Lady Ann!” the Duke of Xenon cried out in despair, for up until that moment he hadn’t thought her capable of such a thing.

But the girl was unmoved by his cry.

“Every flower I touch, regardless of type, can suck up any kind of energy,” the girl said, smiling silently. “Be it a person’s lifeblood or the power from a combat suit, a bolt of lightning or the force of a river. And who made me this way, Father? Was it not you? The very thought of it ever being used against you must’ve seemed preposterous.”

“I shall say no more,” said the voice over the microphone, rapidly moving away and mixed with static. “I won’t ask you to return with me, nor to step aside. Lady Ann, accept your father’s tears as he destroys you!”

“And here is my offering to you!”

A second blossom flew, this one yellow, and it jabbed in by the right side of the white flower. Already down on one knee, the armored giant tilted forward even more.

“Father, you have always been kind to me. However, it only stands to reason that a parent should love their child. It doesn’t stand to reason that the child love the parent in turn.”

The sweet but disturbing little girl took a third bloom—a pale purple one—and raised her right hand high.

"You fool."

At that instant, Ann realized that the voice of the armored giant—the voice of her father—had all of its normal intensity.

The pale purple flower flew. A terrible gleam limned an arc, and before it could even split the bloom, the force of the wind shredded it and the flower blew away.

"Aaaah!"

As if to accompany Lady Ann's cry of pain, bright blood erupted from her left shoulder and the girl bent backward.

"I won't let you perish. You must suffer a while as punishment for your rebelliousness. D, your life is mine for the taking!" the duke exclaimed.

Ann's blood fell in drops from the steely blade projecting from the elbow of his armor. It was over ten feet long—could D possibly survive if it removed his head from his torso?

However, just as the duke was about to strike, an unexpected hindrance stopped him. Ann lay supine on top of D, and around the girl all the colors of the rainbow began to writhe before clinging to every part of the armored form. It was the flowers Ann had planted. The way the roots shot across the length and breadth of the armor's smooth surface was a sight to behold.

Once again, the armored giant staggered. He hadn't even recovered from the damage dealt to him by Ann's first two flowers . . .
and now there were nearly twenty of them.

All the while, the voices and the footsteps of the villagers grew steadily closer.

"The humans of this village mean nothing to me; I shall depart for the time being. When next we meet, Ann, your loving father shall drink your blood!"

And then the Duke of Xenon smoothly dropped feet first back into the hole in the ground from which he'd appeared. The dull whir of a motor rang out and the armor rotated as it sank into the bowels of the earth.

At the forefront of the villagers racing to the scene was Juke. Leaving Sergei and Gordo by Rosaria's side, he'd hurried there.

Seeing the great hole in the ground and D and Lady Ann lying next to it took the villagers' breaths away. Who among them could've imagined that the bloody young girl with her left shoulder split open had fallen fighting to defend the young man of unearthly beauty from her own father? All they felt was a fear of the Nobility and an incomprehensible horror, and they sensed as only the people of the Frontier could that this pair and those they attracted would threaten their peaceful existence.

"Let's kill 'em," someone said.

"Kill 'em!" another repeated.

"Yeah, kill 'em!"

It didn't take long at all for those repeated cries to work like hypnosis,

creating a great and abiding purpose. The will to slaughter still burned in their hearts—Juke was powerless to stop them. Even if he were to try to halt them by force, a single firearm wouldn't do much to deter the villagers plowing forward like a machine bent on murder.

Just before the mob could crush the pair on the ground, a shower of sparks flashed in the transporter's wildly spinning brain. Jumping out in front of the villagers, he spread his arms and said, "Just hold on! The young guy's a Vampire Hunter who's been working as our escort. He's a dhampir, but he was keeping an eye on that girl. She's a little Noble. No doubt they must've had it out here. Now I'll finish the girl off for good. I'm hoping that'll be enough for all of you."

A glint of reason returned to the crazed and bloodshot eyes of the villagers. Based on the present situation, they could understand a little Noble girl being cut down by a Hunter. And though the great hole in the ground was a mystery, it was something beyond their comprehension.

"So, how about it?" Juke called out loudly.

What worried him was that in cases like this, the final decision rested with the mayor, and he would've done well to turn to that person, but he'd heard that this village's mayor and an assistant had set off for a neighboring community three days earlier and wouldn't be back until tomorrow. There were a number of people he recognized, but Juke couldn't decide if any of them were up to acting as a leader.

"If you like, I'll also throw in a little something extra in addition to what you've ordered, as a gift to the village."

That had come to him in a desperate flash, and it proved far more effective than anything he'd said up until now.

Nearly all the villagers wore an expression as if they'd just been exorcised of some demon as they exchanged glances with one another.

"What should we do?" voices whispered here and there, and then they gave way to quiet remarks that quickly built into a chorus.

"I suppose that'll work."

"Good enough!"

"Kill the Noble girl. And once you're done, unload your goods and get out of town. You got that?" one of them said, and he wasn't alone. A number of others voiced their agreement.

"Understood," Juke replied, turning then to face D—and Ann. He was ready to do what needed to be done. In order to save D, there was nothing he could do except dispose of an innocent little girl. Granted, the girl had originally come to kill them all.

"Lend me a spear," he said.

A number of the lengthy weapons were instantly tossed down at his feet. Taking one of them in hand, Juke grabbed Lady Ann by the ankle and pulled her away from D. Straightening up again, he glanced down at the girl to take aim with his spear. He tried to avoid looking at her face.

With blood staining her left cheek, the girl had the face of a veritable angel.

Isn't this murder?

Ignoring the thought that skimmed for a heartbeat through his brain, he prepared to drive the iron tip of the weapon through the chest that was just a little too well formed for its age.

"Wait just a minute!" a low, calm female voice called out, making the whole group turn and look.

"It's the mayor!" someone shouted.

"You're back early."

Due to the stir she created, it was only too clear that the speaker had the trust of the villagers. The mob split down the middle, and a short woman in her fifties came with a composed gait through the crowd to stand before Juke. Though her hair was gray, her blue eyes were filled to overflowing with purpose and intellect.

"I'm Yutta Camus, mayor of the village," she said with a courteous bow to Juke. "What's all this commotion?"

Each and every villager started talking at once. One voice blotted out the next, leaving nothing but pure noise.

"Quiet down!" the mayor roared in a voice like the edge of the wind, and silence returned.

"Mr. Wald, kindly explain."

At this directive—in a tone that'd grown calm with staggering speed—a middle-aged man with a long, horselike face stepped forward from the crowd and explained the situation to Mayor Camus. As parts of it were fairly one sided, Juke tried to interrupt, at which point the mayor told him she'd hear his side later.

And after she'd actually listened to what he had to say, she turned to the group and said, "Maybe it was a premonition? It's fortunate I came back a day early. If I hadn't, an innocent young girl would've been lost without having a chance to explain herself."

At her merciless censure, the villagers lowered their eyes.

When she then turned back to Juke, her face was so mild she seemed like a completely different person.

"And you," she continued. "I don't care if you're trying to save your friend; I don't care if she's a Noble—I don't want you to *ever* think about raising a hand against a child like this. From the look of it, that young man needs medical attention. Why don't you stay in the assembly hall until he's better."

III

In a sense, Juke found Mayor Camus's consideration an unwanted favor. He had no complaint about her treatment of D or the fact that she'd given them permission to stay there, but her generosity was also coupled with a strict admonition not to lay a hand on Lady Ann. To be perfectly honest, he'd wanted to do away with the girl. Knowing there was no use arguing about it, he'd thanked her and got the help of some of the villagers in

bringing the pair back to the wagon—carrying Ann on his own back. He'd ignored Sergei as the man asked what was going on, heading directly to the assembly hall, where he explained the situation to his compatriot in an empty room once their accommodations had been prepared. He even shared his thoughts on the matter of Ann.

Much to his surprise, Sergei replied, "Let's bring her with us."

Stupefied, he asked, "Why?"

"After hearing your tale, I suppose that big hole in the ground must've been made by the little girl's father—the Duke of Xenon, or whatever he's called. I don't really know why a parent would run off and leave their daughter covered in blood, but my hunch is that the girl didn't get taken down by D—I think she might've been trying to save him. I've been keeping an eye on her the whole time, and I can tell you she loves D down to the marrow of her bones. If D told her to die, she'd gladly drive a stake into her own heart. In which case, it looks like you've got yourself a replacement for D. She might not be interested in anything *but* D, but for him she'd fight to the bitter end, and by extension she'd be fighting for us, too. Right?"

"You might have something there. Only we don't have a freaking clue when D's gonna wake up, and the girl's hurt pretty bad, too."

"Snap out of it, Juke. We're talking about a Noble here. See, she may look ten years old, but inside she's a monster, ageless and undying. She'll heal a hundred times faster than D. Just leave her be, I say. Leave her be."

With the logic laid out for him that clearly, Juke had no choice but to nod his head. According to Sergei, Gordo would recover soon, too.

Gotta be worth a shot, he thought.

Not even needing to hear Juke's reply, Sergei read it in the man's face, giving him a light clap on the shoulder and saying, "Okay! We're good, right? I'm gonna look in on D. Leave tonight's watch to me and get yourself a decent night's sleep."

The assembly hall was unexpectedly spacious, and it had a covered garage that could've easily accommodated five or six cargo wagons—that's where their vehicle was parked. Leaving the empty room, Sergei found where D was sleeping. In the room to the right Gordo continued to receive a transfusion, while Rosaria was in the one to the left. Ann had stopped bleeding, so she alone had been left out in their wagon. Wolfsbane had been put on its doors and windows, so she'd have a hard time getting out of it. They couldn't be sure that seeing her roaming around free as you please wouldn't cause another panic among the villagers.

Sergei was worried about D. Earlier, when he'd seen the villagers carrying the Hunter into his room, his left hand had been shriveled like a mummy from the wrist down. Knowing as he did that it served as a sort of medical specialist living within D's body, the transporter was understandably concerned. And it was on account of this that he paid a call on D.

However, before the man had gone ten paces down the hall he heard

the unmistakable sound of breaking glass coming from the direction of D's room. Racing to the rescue, Sergei saw D lying in bed and a bloodstained Lady Ann glaring at the shattered window as the wind carried in darkness. When Sergei and the village physician had examined her, her heart had stopped—despite her Noble nature. But she must've been faking it.

"You little bitch! I knew you were up to no good!"

"I'll thank you to refrain from such vulgarity."

"How long have you been okay?"

"Ever since I was first cut. I was up against my own father, after all," she laughed.

Realizing there'd be no reasoning with her, Sergei asked, "What happened?"

Before posing his question, he'd looked at D and decided that nothing was out of the ordinary.

"See for yourself," Lady Ann said, pointing under D's bed.

On the floor lay a heavy bastard sword that darkly reflected the light from the ceiling.

"Someone from the village?"

Ann shook her head in response to his tense query. Clear as glass beads, her blue eyes burned with rage.

"Well, who was it, then?" he asked, thinking how ridiculous this was and that the answer would be obvious.

Seeming to choose her words with care, Ann replied calmly, "It was Mr. Gordo."

Not surprisingly, the transporter was stupefied, saying, "Of all the absurd—"

But the girl insisted it was true.

How would Gordo get in here when he was still getting a transfusion? And why would anyone need that nasty-looking sword?

As disturbing as the latter question was to ponder, Sergei had a pretty good idea what the answer was. As for the former—

"Why'd you come here?"

Ann's reply to that question was straight enough: "I came to get rid of his left hand. Because I didn't have a chance to deal the coup de grâce."

"What about the wolfsbane?"

"It doesn't work on me," Ann responded, and this time her innocent smile made the hair stand up on his arms.

"At any rate, let's go have a look at Gordo."

Just as the pair was about to leave the room, Juke came running in, having heard the sounds of destruction. All of them went into Gordo's room next door, where the man lay exactly as he had when he'd been brought there, still connected to the transfusion equipment.

"Hey! What's the meaning of this?" Sergei exclaimed, but as he turned to look at the girl, his eyes found only the open door and the hallway, which, while well lit, was still a cold scene.

"I must leave. Short though it was, I enjoyed our journey," Lady Ann

said in an extremely morose tone, the words themselves falling from places unknown. “The villagers will be here soon. They’ll probably wish to destroy me. Before they arrive, I shall leave so I may protect my D from the shadows.”

As the words ceased in the light, there was the sound of stomping feet and angry voices from the front hall.

Fearing more trouble, Juke and Sergei decided to say that it was actually Ann who’d attacked D, and by the time the villagers had bought into it, Ann was racing gracefully through the darkness until she arrived at a building where there wasn’t a single light showing. Peering at a sign on the wall, she saw that the steel plate read *Town Hall*. The back door was unlocked.

Sailing down the corridor like the wind, the girl came to the room at the very back of the first floor. Amid a line of doors that were darkened as if by design, this one alone had a light burning. Nothing could be seen from outside because the shades were drawn to keep supernatural creatures from being drawn to the light spilling out through the frosted glass.

As she was reaching for the doorknob, a voice said, “Come in.”

Ann entered.

At the far end of the spacious room, a gray-haired woman was seated at a desk in front of a window with its wooden shutters closed. The door Ann let go of had a plate on it that read *Mayor*.

“Welcome, Lady Ann,” said the mayor who held the trust and respect of the entire village, smiling with the most heartfelt sincerity at this lovable yet accursed child of the Nobility.

“So it *is* you after all, Dr. Gretchen,” Ann said, not begrudging her host her usual blossom of a smile.

Grinning wryly, the mayor said, “I set upon the real one as she was returning from the neighboring village, and I’d believed I’d done a good job of impersonating her, but how clever of you to find me out. And how did you learn that it was the renowned mayor who was pulling Gordo’s strings?”

By the sound of it, she’d apparently been controlling Gordo from the room and watching everything.

“I simply thought about the timing for Mr. Gordo being turned into a puppet,” Ann replied with a bit of satisfaction. She certainly was a precocious little beauty. “I hadn’t observed anything out of the ordinary about him up till the time D and I left the wagon. And though Juke and Sergei brought the wagon to the assembly hall, there were villagers all around them at the time, so no one could’ve laid a hand on him. After we got there, I can attest that there were no intruders.”

“You were feigning unconsciousness, weren’t you? You certainly fooled everyone.”

“It’s most kind of you to say so.”

“But why?”

“The answer is obvious. To gain their sympathy.”

“You’re an impressive little lady,” the mayor she’d called Dr. Gretchen said, letting out a laugh that left her pale throat exposed. “So—I would love to hear the rest of your formidable reasoning.”

“Very well. It’s as I already mentioned. The only chance you might’ve had to do anything strange to Mr. Gordo would’ve been when everyone went running off to where D and I were. That was when you went to where the wagon had stopped. All alone. You let your assistant go on ahead.”

“But Mr. Sergei was standing watch.”

“That would simply mean you had to put a spell on him as well.”

The mayor nodded time and again with satisfaction.

“Exemplary reasoning, Lady Ann. Your father must be quite proud of you.”

“We are no longer father and daughter. Father cut me, and I have severed all ties to him. Now there is only one person who matters to me.”

“As it happens, you picked the wrong man to be smitten with, didn’t you?” the mayor said, the expression that surfaced on her face filled with undeniable affection.

Strangely enough, it must’ve moved Ann as well, as a glittering trail rolled down the girl’s cheek.

“Thank you. So, Doctor, what do you intend to do about D?”

“I shall dispose of him. I wonder—will you try to interfere?”

“Yes.”

“Then you must go as well,” the mayor said somewhat sadly, a distant glow in her eyes. “Ill-fated though your love may be, I know all too well how you feel. Such a gorgeous Hunter—I’ve lived six millennia and can’t recall ever seeing anyone like him.”

“Then kindly leave him alone.”

“But that’s precisely why I came,” the mayor said, her lips finally twisting into a horrifying shape. “You must be aware of the kind of people I worked on—all humans gifted with incredibly good looks, and a few Nobility as well. And there wasn’t one among them who didn’t weep and cling to me, begging me to kill them or destroy them. That is the level to which I’ve taken my skill.”

“I won’t allow you to lay a finger on my beloved!” Ann asserted frostily, the radiant smile now entirely wiped from her face.

THE LADY AND THE LEFT HAND

CHAPTER 6

I

Still on edge but unable to get rough with the people to whom the mayor had given protection, the villagers set off in search of Ann, at which point Juke said to Sergei, “I’ll go with their group. You stay and take care of things here.”

“To be honest, I don’t know if I can handle it. We’ve got Rosaria to worry about, too.”

“She’s Sleeping Beauty.”

“Yeah, the Sleeping Beauty Gaskell made. But I don’t have a clue when something other than a prince’s kiss might wake her from the general’s spell. After she slits my throat, it’ll be a little late for me to say I trusted her.”

“Then tie her up good. It doesn’t look like she’s strong like the little lady was.”

Sergei sighed. “Do what you like, then. Anyway, be careful out there,” he said, waving his hand. Outside, the torches and lanterns the villagers carried danced like fireflies.

After seeing Juke off, Sergei headed straight for D’s room—in all the commotion, he’d forgotten to check on the Hunter’s left hand, which he’d been so worried about. Closing the door, Sergei was a little unsteady on his legs, but he hastily pulled himself up straight and rubbed both temples firmly.

Must be tired, he thought.

Coming up on D’s left side, Sergei knelt down. He had a grim look in his eye. Putting a piece of glass to D’s lips, he confirmed that the Hunter was barely breathing, and that the sleep upon him was so deep it was nearly death before he stood up again.

In the misty depths of his brain, a gray-haired old woman with red eyes was ordering him to do something. It seemed Gordo was there, too. Sergei was certain of what she’d said.

Taking a machete with a blade a foot and a half long out of his jacket, Sergei adjusted his grip on it time and again until he finally settled on a satisfactory stance.

Look for an opportunity to cut D’s left hand off. That’s what the old woman had told him. Although Gordo had apparently made a move first, he’d been unsuccessful. Oddly enough, the girl had interrupted him when she’d come to get rid of D’s left hand.

“Wish you could see this, Lady Ann. I’m getting rid of it now!”

Taking D’s desiccated left hand in his own and pulling it well out, Sergei swung the machete down without taking particular aim. For a second there was about as much resistance as hacking through a sapling, and then he went smoothly through the left wrist. Staring intently at the limb that was as motionless as a dead branch, Sergei tossed it to the floor.

And it made a sound just like a dead branch hitting the ground.

“What a troubling little tomboy you are,” said Mayor Camus—or rather, Dr. Gretchen in the guise of the mayor—as she quietly rose from her seat. “All your beloved flowers have closed their buds and gone to sleep. How do you intend to slay me?”

“Oh, I still have flowers.”

The mayor cocked an eyebrow, for she’d just watched Lady Ann bring her right hand up to her mouth. Lips like delicate petals opened, and the girl expelled a pale pink shape into her hand.

“This one’s called Fragrant Silent Night—it was my mother’s favorite flower. She was destroyed by my father.”

And with these words, Ann blew gently onto the tender bloom in the palm of her hand. Like a petal borne on the wind it sailed, and though it should’ve been easy enough to dodge or catch, the mayor didn’t manage to do either. Standing as still as a flower picker enthralled by a bloom, she took it right in the middle of the forehead. Roots ran beneath the skin and the light pink flower swiftly turned a darker shade.

“Dear me,” one of them muttered, but it happened to be Ann.

The flower was a far deadlier weapon than it appeared, but it had turned a horrid color and withered feebly.

“Ann, didn’t your father ever tell you my specialty was the field of toxin research?” the old woman laughed sinisterly. Her solemn features overlapped with a youthful countenance of unimaginable beauty. Even when the laughter stopped, the old face didn’t return.

“Dr. Gretchen!” Lady Ann said, shouting the name of her formidable opponent once more.

“Young lady, are you acquainted with the portrait of me from before my resurrection?” asked the beautiful woman dressed in the mayor’s clothes. Apparently she was a narcissist and shameless self-promoter—she wanted to talk about her past so badly she couldn’t help herself.

“Not even I know for certain when it was that I was born, aside from the fact that it must’ve been more than six thousand years ago. I first became interested in toxins at the age of two. Yes, I believe I recall it quite clearly. My father concocted poisons as a pastime, you see, and he experimented on me. He said he wanted to see just how much the agony could distort my lovely face. And his wish was granted; I went through hell. Every drop of blood boiled in my veins, and my brain and organs melted. Blood shot from every pore on my body, and I even spat up my own entrails. I cursed my father. I cursed the Sacred Ancestor, too. But a miracle occurred. In the midst of that pain and torment, my soul knew the joy of triumphing over it all. Can you understand that? The sweet taste of pain that you might never savor, the splendor of the poison that produced it. Shocked by the results, my father apologized to me, and I asked him to teach me about toxins. And you know the reason why three millennia later I’d earned a place in the history of the Nobility as ‘the woman who never

should've been born,' don't you?"

It was a long, boastful talk. Ann nodded numbly. The answer she knew to that question didn't make listening to Dr. Gretchen's gasconade any more agreeable. Showing no fear, the girl said in a voice that was like a song, "You administered poison to more than fifty thousand Nobles, knowing full well that even the most virulent toxin you made wouldn't kill them. Instead, your concoctions had the power to make those Nobles suffer for all eternity. You kept them hidden in the basement of your castle, where you toyed with them."

"I gave them every conceivable poison and studied their reactions. Immortal and indestructible—can you think of anything more perfect for experimentation than subjects who would last forever? Still, men and women reacted differently. The effects of the drugs were different on babies and old people. Ah, what sweet, happy times those were! One drop of the beautiful drugs I concocted would make a little girl's abdomen swell up like an ant's and burst, or make the naked body of a countess melt away like mud. I believe it was the ruler of the Duchy of Richeur whose agony was such that he clawed at his own body, peeling off skin and rending flesh until he was nothing but a skeleton and a brain. Nevertheless, he didn't die. Torn apart or liquefied, they would live forever, tormented by unending pain. When the Sacred Ancestor apprehended me, fifty thousand dying but deathless Nobility were found in my domain, so that was the official toll given for my victims. But in the Mountains of Madness in a location unbeknownst to the Sacred Ancestor, a hundred times that number still groan in agony. At present, I'm considering going back to them someday and continuing my experiments. Actually, I've already engaged in some—in the castle of the great General Gaskell. I can't change what I am. I can't be stopped. After capturing you and slaying D, I intend to return to the general's territory as swiftly as possible."

Despite the fact that anyone would've found her experiments abhorrent, what radiated from every inch of the woman who'd conducted them was a fascination with the unknown and an enthusiasm of a purity beyond compare.

"No matter what else that Hunter may be, he's a human half-breed, after all. Though I'm sure he can't begin to compare to the Nobles I've used, his beauteous countenance makes even *my* heart beat faster. I wish to see him suffer from my poison. I wish to watch as blood runs from his every orifice, as his eyes pop out, as he bites through his own lips. And I've already given two humans orders toward that end."

"*Two* humans? Gordo and—"

"You said it yourself earlier, did you not? Who was with him when I put him under a spell?"

"Sergei!" the girl exclaimed, literally leaping into the air. The name of the other man the dreaded toxicologist would've encountered had flashed before her. He was still with D!

Turning in astonishment—in other words, turning her back to the

doctor—was a mistake Ann made out of concern for D. A needle was thrust deep between her shoulder blades. A foot in length, the needle had a semitransparent tube less than a millimeter in diameter stretching from its back end into the mouth of the mayor—or Dr. Gretchen. Suddenly, an ocher liquid flowed through the tube. One of the doctor's beloved poisons was being injected into Ann's body.

"First, let's start with a little game," the doctor said with a grin.

Lady Ann had bent backward the second she was pierced, and she ran now for the door without ever breaking that pose. The needle came free, whistling as it was sucked back into the doctor's mouth.

As Ann got to the doorway, she coughed violently. She could feel terrible fever and chills racing through her body.

"What do you intend to do?" Dr. Gretchen called out, her voice following the girl out the door. "D still sleeps, and two of the men who guard him are my puppets. And all of the surrounding villagers respect me. D must die here!"

Ann ran to the front hall. When she was ten feet from the door, it opened from the other side and villagers came pouring in. Seeing Ann halted there, they were stunned for a moment, but they quickly turned and shouted to those behind them, "Here she is!"

Ann jumped to the left. There was a window. The glass glittered like fragments of the moon as it shattered. Crushing a number of those pieces underfoot, the lovely little girl ran on by the light of the real moon.

Where are you going, and what do you seek? There can be no salvation now, Ann!

II

Ann was irritated by how slow her legs were. Near and far, here and there, she could hear choruses of shouts announcing they'd found her or asking where she was. As long as she could hear them, she knew she could move with relative freedom.

Suddenly catching a bit of "—to the assembly hall," Ann was horrified.

A number of the torches that danced in the darkness were moving in the same direction as her goal. They were probably going on instructions from the mayor—Dr. Gretchen. But at their current speed, she still had a chance.

Racing back like a gust of wind, Ann found no sign of anyone around the assembly hall and made straight for D's room. Running over to where D lay all alone, Ann pulled back the sheets and was left breathless. D's left hand was gone. From the look of the wound, she could guess the weapon and the way it'd been used.

Glancing at the floor, Ann called out, "Where are you, Mr. Left Hand? I need your power, you see. Aid me for the sake of my D."

After that, she listened hard for a response.

Five seconds . . . Ten . . . Twenty . . .

Off in the distance, she could hear people's voices growing nearer.

"I've no choice but to take him with me," she said, starting toward D's bed.

Just then, there was the small, hard knock of something weakly springing from the floor. There could be no mistaking the direction Ann's eyes turned: under D's bed.

Kneeling on the floor, Ann craned her neck to peek beneath it.

The withered hand was in such a sad state, it wouldn't be surprising if she'd failed to tell it from an ordinary piece of trash.

"Say, can you hear me? My name is Lady Ann."

If she didn't get an answer, she intended to pull off a finger or two to bring it back to its senses. After all, it was Lady Ann who'd put it in that shape to begin with. There were any number of ways she could fix it.

"What do you want?" said a feeble and painfully hoarse voice, but it was definitely the same one as before.

Ann's little chest was filled to bursting with hope and relief.

"You're still alive, just as I thought."

"I might've shriveled up, but I don't die that easy. So why is it . . . you're looking for me?"

"To save my beloved D. There's no time now so I can't explain in detail, but the mayor is Dr. Gretchen in disguise. She's the most dangerous poison specialist in the entire history of the Nobility. She's using Mr. Gordo and Mr. Sergei to go after my D."

A faint sound spilled from the left hand—a short, feeble sigh.

"There's no one who seems likely to cooperate with me aside from you and Mr. Juke. That's why I've come back."

"I see . . . The way you feel . . . about him . . . it's no joke. First thing to do . . . is get me and D out of here. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

Just as Ann was replying, there was the sound of the front door being thrown open, and footsteps and voices soon followed. Quickly reaching out and grabbing the left hand, Ann stood up, got D from the bed, and threw him over her shoulder. Although her intentions toward the left hand were now the complete opposite of what they'd once been, the girl didn't find this the least bit strange.

With a full-grown man over the shoulder of what looked to be a ten-year-old's body and the severed left hand in her right hand, she started at an easy run toward the window, and then fell forward.

"What . . . are you doing? You little idiot . . ." the left hand cursed weakly as it fell on the floor, but then it gasped in a louder tone.

While under the bed, it hadn't been able to make out Lady Ann's face because she was backlit, but now it saw with perfect clarity.

"Who the hell are *you*?" it asked.

The ever-innocent face of the girl struggling madly to rise from the floor had ballooned to twice its normal size, and probably due to the fever it was also bruised a deep black. And it wasn't just her face. Her arms, legs,

and the rest of her body were so grossly swollen that no trace of the innocent little girl remained.

"You . . . got poisoned . . . right? Surprised you made it this far . . . in the shape you're in . . ."

Ann didn't hear the left hand's words of praise. She was desperately trying to get her poison-filled body to rise again.

Somehow making it to her feet, she'd no sooner resumed carrying D and the left hand when the door was thrown open and human figures spilled through the opening like a pile of soapsuds.

"There she is!"

"She's trying to make off with that injured guy!"

"Where are the stakes? And somebody bring me a hammer!"

Three men with rifles appeared in the doorway and, after looking at Ann, they moved to the very forefront of the villagers, dropped to one knee, and took aim. Their stake-firing guns were already cocked. Propelled by compressed gas at an impressive sixteen hundred feet per second, the rough wooden stakes would probably have little trouble piercing Lady Ann's heart.

It appeared the admirable fight this fearsome little girl had put up had come to an end.

"Cover your mouth with my palm," the hoarse voice told her.

She said nothing either in agreement or disagreement. Out of pure reflex, Ann pressed the mummified palm to her mouth. Something soft touched her lips—the tiny pair of lips that'd formed on the palm. And from between them, something warm went into her mouth.

"Fire!" someone cried.

Three wooden shafts flew toward the innocent little girl's chest faster than the speed of sound. As proof that their aim was dead on Ann, all three shafts collided in the same spot, sending each other flying. One of the three flew toward the window, and at the very same moment a strange little figure slipped out through the now glass-free window, becoming one with the darkness.

As soon as she landed, Ann raced for the nearby forest.

From the left hand she gripped with her right, a fragmented tone was heard to say, "Well . . . how did you like my kiss?"

"I feel much better now," Ann replied. She still felt languid to the marrow of her bones, but power was filling her. Though it had been only a minute amount, the energy the left hand's lips had blown into her mouth had been of a high purity. The swelling in her face went down rapidly.

"That'll hold you . . . for two hours," the left hand said. "Bury D in the ground. It's all . . . up to you."

Even Ann could tell the energy she'd just received had been the left hand's last. Her right hand grew heavy. Whether the limb she held had died or merely fainted didn't matter to Ann. Ordinarily, she would've discarded it at this point or finished it off. The only reason she'd saved it was in the hopes of helping D.

The area around the assembly hall was full of silhouettes and streaks of light. Weaving her way between them, Ann made her way the better part of a mile into the forest. She knew what she should do.

In an inky darkness not even the moonlight could penetrate, her dainty hands began clawing at the earth. Her sweet little face had nearly returned to normal. Partway through the job, the sound of digging halted—it was a nasty trick of the blocked poison. Horrible chills threatened to rob her of her consciousness, but the little girl battled through them, her hands and clothes smeared with dirt as she continued digging up the ground.

In no time, a long sigh of satisfaction flowed from between the clustered trees.

"I wonder if I should bury your head as well," the girl mused. "No, then you wouldn't be able to breathe."

She carried D into the hole, laid him out, and covered him with dirt.

"This will bring you back to life," she said, and though she was breathing quite raggedly, there was a ring of relief to her voice. "But if by some chance it doesn't, I won't let anyone touch you but me. If you don't awaken, we'll stay here forever—no, I shall find an opening, and together we'll run away. All you need to do is keep sleeping. I'll look after you for the rest of your days. And if, I say, *if* your dhampir mortality can't be overcome, then at that time I, too, shall pass, my beloved."

The ardor the innocent girl's heart contained must've been great, for her confession in the darkness laid bare her true feelings—feelings so intense and painful her body burned with them. But there was no one there to listen. D continued to slumber quietly, and his left hand was also out of commission. Though it was pointless to go on speaking, Lady Ann didn't see the pointlessness of it.

When her monologue was finished, the girl's eyes burned with a fierce determination, and her brain worked incessantly. Sooner or later, someone would come looking for them. Before that happened, she had to break through their perimeter and get D out of the village—and by dawn at the latest. After that, it would be a journey just for the two of them. The ten-year-old girl fantasized lovingly about traveling around carrying the unconscious D—it was perhaps the first satisfaction her soul had ever known. If only he would truly never wake again! Exaltation and a counterbalancing sadness rose in Ann, bringing her to tears.

It was probably due to being lost in these powerful emotions that she didn't sense anyone approaching. The instant the sound of a twig snapping underfoot echoed against her eardrum, Ann spun around.

A white light shone directly in the girl's face.

"Don't move!"

"Here she is!" a man said, turning and cupping his hands around his mouth.

"Don't call anyone!" another one told him. "We're gonna take care of this little girl ourselves. There's the next election for the mayor to think of."

"Damn, you've got a point there."

By this time, Ann's eyes had clearly picked three strong men and the stake guns they carried from the darkness.

"Freak, we won't let you get away this time!" said the man carrying the incandescent lamp, his voice trembling—after all, they'd run into a Noble in the middle of the night. Obviously he'd never experienced fear quite like this before.

Thousands of years had passed since the Nobility went into decline, so there weren't very many chances now to encounter a Noble, especially not one who was a little girl as pretty as a doll. It was on account of this that the men didn't faint or flee from abject terror and shock. They also had another very good reason—the election for mayor one of them had mentioned.

"All three of these things fire stakes," one of the men said. "And we're the best shots in the village. No matter how you try to run, we'll make sure at least two of them hit the bull's-eye. Just accept it."

"There's one thing I must verify," Ann said fearlessly. "You won't do anything to him . . . Am I correct?"

The light of the lantern shifted, revealing D's face. Any way you looked at it, it was a horrifying sight, but the handsome features the light fell upon had a beauty so intense it left the men dazed. The lantern was lowered. The man who carried it had a blank look on his face.

Taking a hard kick in the ass, the man with the lantern came back to his senses. The light was raised again.

"Snap out of it!" the center figure snarled at him in a harsh tone. He was the same one who'd said not to call anyone and who'd mentioned the election.

Turning to Ann, he said, "Sad to say it, but this trouble started with you two—because we let a Noble and Noble half-breed into the village. Those freaking transport guys will be looking at some fines, I'm sure, but we'll finish with you two right here. After that, it'll just be a matter of convincing everyone I made the right decision."

His ghastly determination had given rise to this bold tone.

"If it were a matter of me alone, I would've been in a quandary, but now you say you mean to harm him as well," Lady Ann said in a tone that was actually quite bracing, delivering the words like a soliloquy. But as she stood next to where D's head poked from the ground—with her sweet little face glowing pale in the circle of light and her eyes alone raised to stare at the men—something terrible lurked in her gaze. The second she'd heard they'd take the life of the man she loved, the dear little girl had been transformed into a demoness.

However, the center man shouted, "Fire!"

Was there anything that could be done to save Ann in the heartbeat that followed?

Perhaps there was. As proof, all three of the men clutched at their throats, clawed at the sky, then toppled every which way. By the time they hit the ground, black blood gushed from their noses and mouths and they'd

breathed their last. They'd gone through their death throes while they fell.

Perhaps the way they died tipped her off, or maybe it was the superkeen senses unique to the Nobility, but Ann put one hand over her mouth, then crouched down to press the other one over D's.

From the depths of the darkness a voice carried on the night wind could be heard to say, "You can relax for the time being. For those of Noble blood, it's no more than a sweet perfume."

"Dr. Gretchen!"

Mayor Camus walked out of the stand of trees that towered behind where the three men had fallen. Despite the fact that the terrain was a twisted mess of snaking tree roots, her gait was as smooth as if she were on level ground.

"I sowed poison in the wind. Now, leave D there and go. If you don't, then Noble or not, I'll send a deadly poison at you that will leave you in eternal pain."

Just for a moment, Ann hesitated. Dr. Gretchen's experiments had been so outrageous not even her fellow Nobles could hide their disgust. It came as no surprise the girl's tiny heart nearly stopped. However, a second later Ann cursed herself for her indecision.

Who cares if she performs vivisection on me or dissolves my body? It doesn't matter what happens to me. So long as I can save my precious D, I shall gladly go into the sleep of death.

Ann spat another flower up into her hand, this one a pale purple bud. In the same manner as before, she breathed on it and sent it flying at Dr. Gretchen. Again the blossom withered and fell from the doctor's brow.

"Stop this foolishness. I don't know how it is you still have enough strength left for that, but let my poisoned wind now ravage both of you."

But before the doctor/mayor had finished her declaration, the ground shook. The doctor was thrown well off balance, and her sinister wind blew off into the ether.

Stumbling and falling on her back when her foot caught on a root, Ann saw an enormous silhouette rising from the earth between Dr. Gretchen and herself and cried, "Father!"

III

"Duke of Xenon—does your madness extend this far?" Dr. Gretchen shouted as she barely managed to regain her balance and secure her footing, but a second later she peered at the figure dominating the darkness and cried out in astonishment, "Grand Duke Mehmet!"

"Indeed, it is I, Mehmet," the huge figure said, bowing.

Though the movement was fluid, the doctor was familiar with this Noble's name and his style of combat, and she'd also determined the true nature of the gigantic silhouette.

"Mehmet's machine man," she muttered.

Standing more than twelve feet tall, the enormous humanoid machine

was Grand Duke Mehmet's weapon. This robot—or android, to be technical—was a device born of the Nobility's science, but capable of far more intricate movements than other machines, which made it as graceful as any human. Just look at it. Black hair swaying in the night breeze, a dauntless mask of oriental styling resting on a bronzed face, threads of gold and silver, blue, red, and purple—his dazzling cape and clothes were stitched with the most brilliant hues. It didn't differ in the slightest from the real Grand Duke Mehmet—aside from the fact that it was gigantic, its face and build were a perfect duplicate of his own. In comparison, the combat exoskeleton worn by Ann's father—the Duke of Xenon—was a rough suit of armor utterly devoid of artistic sense.

And there was another difference between the two.

"Where are *you*, Grand Duke Mehmet?" the doctor said to him.

"In the basement of General Gaskell's castle. I fear I've imbibed a bit too much wine," the giant doll of Mehmet replied.

Although the Duke of Xenon's armor required him to be inside the exoskeleton controlling it, Grand Duke Mehmet's machine man was, as the name implied, a marionette that could be freely operated from a great distance. It went without saying which of the two offered the greater safety and convenience for its operator.

"How enviable, Grand Duke Mehmet. In that case, why don't you relax and dream of your long-lost kingdom?"

"Actually, I can't do that," the great image of the grand duke said, placing a hand over his mouth and letting a gentle burp escape.

Gentle? It sounded like a rumbling deep in the earth!

He said, "The great general told you what would happen if you threatened the duke's precious daughter. Anyone can see that the general is going about this the wrong way. On hearing that you'd been sent out, the duke informed the general that if so much as a scratch came to Ann, he and all his clan would be turned against Gaskell, at which point our great general hastened to send me. My, but he has the strangest weaknesses."

Letting out what sounded like a sigh, he continued, "From his basement I sent out my reconnaissance bugs, which finally found you. I made it here in the nick of time, thank goodness. Now I'd like you to cease and desist."

"That precocious little princess is crazy with love," the doctor said, and she too heaved a sigh, only hers was a hundred times more refined than that of the grand duke's stand-in. "Without eliminating her, slaying D will be impossible."

"You will have to leave that to me."

"I can't believe this."

"Hey, now!" the false grand duke said somewhat sadly. "I thought that might be the case, so I brought the written orders from the general with me. Satisfied?"

"They're fake."

"Doctor . . ."

“I healed the great general’s wound so I might gain permission to be out here now. I won’t allow anyone to interfere with me. D is my prey! Step aside.”

“Then there’s no avoiding this,” the gigantic Mehmet said, his upper body bending back far.

He took a deep breath in preparation for the coming battle.

Still looking up at the night sky, he said, “*This* me is a machine. Your poison won’t work on me, Dr. Gretchen.”

“I wonder about that,” the doctor replied, her words suddenly halting with a choked groan. The fake grand duke’s hand had seized her neck with lightning speed. Gasping unintelligibly, her agonized face turned purple before the Nobleman’s night-piercing gaze.

“Now, let us return to the castle, Doctor,” the giant declared gently. “Oh—I almost forgot the most important part.”

His body turned to the right and he extended his other hand to Ann, who was still on her rear on the ground.

“Back you go to your father—”

Sheathed by an enormous armored glove, the hand convulsed terribly.

“Wh-why, my body’s going numb . . . It can’t be . . .”

“It worked on you, didn’t it, Grand Duke Mehmet?”

Swiftly slipping free from the grasp of the trembling fingers, Dr. Gretchen took cover behind a thick stand of trees, and then began to explain what she’d done.

“Which one of you is in pain, milord? This odious impostor, or the real you far off in the castle?”

“W-why me? You—when did you poison me, Doctor?”

“Back at the castle.”

Ignoring the agonized giant, the doctor focused her attention on what lay beyond its massive form.

“I don’t believe in any of that nonsense about working with colleagues toward a common goal. It was my misfortune to be born into a world where enemies surround me. That’s why I dispersed poison in the castle, too. Since this isn’t the great general’s domain, this probably won’t reach his ears,” she laughed.

“How could you . . . do such a thing? Do you intend . . . to do away with the lot of us?” he cried, spitting the words like a gout of blood, and then black blood actually did fall to the ground like rain.

What an intricate device this was! The instant Grand Duke Mehmet vomited blood off in the distant castle, the machine man spat up blood here.

The ideal machine, it was truly one with its operator. What allowed it to mimic every little movement of the operator were devices developed by scientists of the Nobility called “synchronizing circuits”—also known as “doppelgänger circuits.” It was said a machine man equipped with these circuits would shed sorrowful tears when its operator wallowed in an abyss of grief, and if that person were wounded, the machine would bleed from the same spot. And that was indeed the case.

“This poison only goes into effect when the person exposed to it harbors murderous intent against me. But fear not. As a Noble, you should recover from it in less than an hour. In the meantime, I shall be busy,” she continued, circling around the writhing machine man.

“They’re gone!” she exclaimed, her eyes wide with astonishment.

Surely the little girl possessed abilities far exceeding anything any of them could’ve imagined. In the scant time the doctor and the machine man had been fighting, Ann had unearthed D—who’d been buried up to the neck—and carried him as she made her escape.

“Damn that little bitch!”

As the doctor stood there, the sound of her teeth grinding ringing out, voices cried out behind her.

“The earthquake was this way.”

“Oh, there’s something over here!”

“Bring the stakes!”

The voices of the villagers sailed through the air, about 70 percent tension and the remaining 30 percent full of fight.

Clucking her tongue once, the doctor turned in their direction with the face of the mayor and shouted in the voice of the same, “Over here! There’s a Noble about! Somebody help me!”

And to the machine man, who was panting breathlessly, she said, “People are coming. Go wreak some havoc before you leave.”

What followed was a tremendous nightmare for the village of Krakow. The colossal figure of a suspected Noble appeared from the forest and trampled every villager that crossed his path or struck them dead before vanishing into the darkness. In the time it took him to leave the village, the death toll reached twenty, and eight houses were utterly destroyed. Witnesses testified that its face was just like a human’s and that it walked almost like it was drunk, but these accounts were attributed to the trauma and excitement of the disaster.

It was nearly dawn before a brief period of peace was finally reclaimed thanks to the mayor’s instructions. With no place else to direct their rage, the villagers naturally turned to the transport party. Though Juke had been

involved in the search, he was tied up, while a mob burst into the assembly hall and hauled Sergei, Gordo, and even Rosaria off to the local jail. It should be noted that this treatment wasn't the norm—the code of the Frontier said that anyone connected to the Nobility was to immediately be expelled. This was due to concerns that the Nobility would take revenge if any harm were to come to their cohorts. But it was Mayor Camus who'd instructed them to do so.

She'd told the frightened and perplexed villagers, "This isn't merely about what happened in our town; it's a perfect opportunity to show the world that we're all sick of being threatened by the Nobility."

A number of the villagers voiced their objections.

In reply, she said, "If they go to another village and do something similar, we're going to regret tossing them out for all our days."

That shut them up.

"In light of the village's losses, they're all to be beheaded. The sentence is to be carried out publicly at noon tomorrow," she said, for some reason giving them another day to live.

†

Ann was happy—she'd managed to get out of the village with D and his left hand thanks to the mayhem the fake Grand Duke Mehmet had caused. After running on and on through the dark of night, it was nearly dawn when she hid in some ancient ruins several miles from the village. Though the foglike shield that General Gaskell had given her to allow her to move about in daylight covered her from head to toe, daybreak couldn't help but pain this child of fiendish blood. Ann writhed in agony in the watery light that speared in through holes in the roof and walls, panting as she tore up the brick floor, dug into the black earth that was exposed, then buried D in it. Around the time she finished doing this, the sunshine grew stronger and the light that'd come to the world while she was occupied seared her diminutive form mercilessly.

"That shield will only last three days," the general had instructed her sternly. Still, when the girl lay down in the shadows formed by the stone columns and walls, her heart was filled with both relief at having protected the one she loved and joyous anticipation of the night to come. There lay the world of the Nobility, where human hands could never reach them. Even if her shield failed, she didn't think it would be terribly difficult to hide themselves from humans and the sun by day. She would just keep on going—through a world of moonlight and star shine and night winds, just D and her.

Without having a chance to investigate the furthest reaches of the ruins, Ann fell fast asleep. When she awoke, her body told her it was still the middle of the day. She recognized the young lady who now stood before her. The people in the wagon had called the one who'd been asleep the whole time Rosaria.

“What do you—” Ann began, her tone like a cry of agony as she tried to go into a combat stance but failed.

The young lady looked at her sadly, and then turned around.

“Where are you going?”

Trying to stand but unable to do so, Ann used her hands and feet to crawl across the floor. When she rounded a column, D came into view. Rosaria knelt by his side, and she seemed to be telling him something. Only bits and pieces reached the girl’s ears, things like “tomorrow morning” and “execution.”

She felt a terrible foreboding. That young lady was trying to bring D back to his old world, wasn’t she?

“He can’t hear you,” Ann shouted, clinging to the column to pull herself up. “Really, he can’t—so go back.”

By the time she’d spat one of her deadly blooms into the palm of her hand, Rosaria was fading as if she were dissolving into the abundant glow. A ray of the refreshing light burned Ann’s body, but the agonized girl crept toward D.

He was there.

“Ah . . .”

A glittering something spilled from the girl’s eyes. Ann had forgotten that they were called tears. But her heart still clung to the melancholy feelings that had given rise to them.

“Don’t go . . . Please don’t go anywhere. Stay with me . . . always.”

THE EVE OF THE EXECUTION

CHAPTER 7

I

It was in the early afternoon of that day that two visitors called on Mayor Camus's home. The mayor lived alone, and, unusually, heavy curtains had been drawn across the windows, leaving the interior of the abode in darkness. The reason she gave for this was that, exhausted from the previous night's search and the shock of running into the giant, she wanted to try to get some good rest. Still, when the pair gave their names, she appeared from the depths of the darkness, passing through the living room with a clearly troubled expression. A strong incense burned, as if to mask some odor.

Not even bothering to offer them tea and seemingly unembarrassed to be there in her nightgown, she showed them her pearly teeth as she said, "Welcome, Duke of Xenon. So nice of you to come, Grand Duke Mehmet."

Her eyes were as round and innocent as a child's, her pale skin alluringly free of wrinkles and invested with the most amazing vitality. Most notable were her crimson lips, which looked as if they'd been daubed with fresh blood—the bewitchingly beautiful face was not that of the aged mayor so admired by the inhabitants of the village.

"I believe you know why we're here, don't you?" a man in dusty red traveling clothes asked, leaning across the table as he did so. Though slightly balding, he had bushy eyebrows and was covered from the nose to the chin by a heavy beard that resembled a bird's nest. He bore a passing resemblance to the little girl who'd run off with D the night before. Today, he wasn't wearing his combat exoskeleton. It was Roland, the Duke of Xenon.

And the other one was also a middle-aged traveler dressed in a threadbare coat and trousers—because the huge face of a machine man that was his perfect twin had been seen the previous night, he wore a patch over his right eye, had made his complexion paler, and had disguised the shape of his nose, but Grand Duke Mehmet let his incomparably fierce lust for killing show clearly now as he threatened in a chilling tone, "Even if you slew D, that would hardly be the end of this."

In response, Mayor Camus—or rather, Dr. Gretchen—smiled seductively and boldly asserted, "You must excuse me, but that doesn't strike me as something two Nobles renowned for their intelligence and bravery would say. Those are strong words."

It went without saying that murderous intent rose like flames from both men.

Not surprisingly, a faint fear and turbulence skimmed across the woman's gorgeous countenance, but she did a wonderful job ridding herself of it.

"The two of you received permission from the great General Gaskell to come here together, I assume?" she asked them, just to be sure.

"Of course," said the Duke of Xenon. "Though the general had only allowed us to operate solo to prevent us from colluding, he made an enormous exception and called a meeting because your actions, Doctor, were *that* unpardonable!"

The Nobleman's eyes gave off a red glow, but Dr. Gretchen returned their glare with an ironic look, saying, "My actions—you mean attempting to do away with your darling daughter along with D instead of trying to save her? Or are you referring to my opposing Grand Duke Mehmet when he came to dissuade me?"

"Both," Grand Duke Mehmet said, his one exposed eye turning red. "Add to that the fact that you poisoned the lot of us. You are—"

There the Greater Noble broke off.

"Insane?" The doctor must've been terribly amused, because she forgot to cover her mouth as she laughed. "Do you think a madwoman would be capable of researching toxins? That's the question that should've been posed when I first started using Nobles in my experiments. But back then and forever more, I swear I am sane—I am not the least bit mad."

"Then you must know what's coming," the Duke of Xenon said, raising his right hand to shoulder level. His fingers were curled as if holding something, and the long spear that appeared in their grasp was the same as the one he'd put through D's chest. See how its length, glowing yet semitranslucent, grew to fill the space. Its tip stretched right toward the heart of the beautiful woman clad in an old woman's nightgown.

"And the great general gave you permission for this as well?"

"Of course."

The doctor nodded. The general had certainly been uncomfortable dealing with her. Nevertheless, she didn't so much as raise an eyebrow as she asked, "Once you've destroyed me, how will you find D?"

"We'll manage somehow," the Duke of Xenon responded, but his tone was less than crisp. He obviously lacked confidence in these words.

"Thanks to the shields the general developed, we've gained the ability to operate in daylight. If your darling daughter is intent on protecting D, she'll have fled far from here by now. Even if the two of you were to split up, it would prove a Herculean task."

"But you mean to tell us *you* could do it?" Grand Duke Mehmet asked, sticking his chin out. "How?"

"Tomorrow morning, I shall execute D's compatriots. I've already sent messenger pigeons to the neighboring villages and have express riders spreading the word. If D should hear of this, he's sure to come flying back."

"Rubbish! And if he doesn't?" the Duke of Xenon spat.

"I've heard the man known as D would never abandon his business associates. And as you're no doubt aware, this time, for whatever reason, he's joined up with a transport party."

"Didn't you say D was sleeping? No doubt that'd be the sort of coma that occurs only in dhampirs and strikes without warning. Who says that he'll awaken before the day is out and learn of his compatriots' execution?"

"If he doesn't, then there'll just be a few more headless corpses in the world. But it would be well worth your while to wait. If you are so determined to take my life, you are more than welcome to it after that," she said eloquently, not retreating in the least. To speak this way in the presence of two Greater Nobles, she had to be either incredibly confident or truly mad.

The pair fell silent, exchanged glances, and then stared at the beautiful woman with a kind of suspicion in their eyes. The way she talked about executing the three transporters left them wondering if the doctor was merely looking forward to killing them.

"What shall we do?" Grand Duke Mehmet inquired.

"I'm going to look for my daughter. If D is with her, I'll strike him down. Aside from that—we should just wait. It's only a day. And if by some chance D doesn't come, we can look forward to tearing her to pieces."

The semitransparent spear that sat in his hand like a piece of spun glass now became a very real weapon of destruction. It quickly slid forward. The same tip that'd pierced D's chest pressed a bit into the swell of Dr. Gretchen's bosom. The doctor endured it, merely crinkling her brow ever so slightly.

The spearhead came away again.

"To be honest, I hope D doesn't come," the Duke of Xenon said as he rose slowly in his traveler's garb. His spear had become one with the darkness-hued air. "So long as my daughter is safe, we'll search for them later. However, I'm more interested in driving my spear through this woman's heart."

"My sentiments exactly."

Though the two of them aired these staggering thoughts before her, Dr. Gretchen simply smiled like some holy woman enraptured by a heavenly choir.

Late in the afternoon when the western sky had taken on a tinge of blue was the time the golden light became the gentle glow of evening. And as that light fell in ripples like a length of fabric across the ruins, D slumbered on. Was the Rosaria Ann had seen just an illusion? Her whispers didn't seem to have reached the consciousness of the handsome young man as he slept.

Perhaps it was the air and the breeze that woke Ann once more around dusk. On seeing Rosaria, she'd thought it best to move D someplace else, but her weariness and the midday sun had caused her to fall fast asleep. Though her expression remained a little sleepy looking, it quickly regained its glow, filling with joy. D was safe. All that remained was to leave here.

As she tried to rise, her diminutive form swayed weakly and an intense feeling of enervation assailed her. When she lay flat on the floor, she knew the reason for this—the energy D's left hand had given her had run out. After that, Dr. Gretchen's poison had spread throughout her body. But her mind was focused, and the chills were relatively minor because the poison

must've grown diluted by now.

"It'll take a little longer, I guess," Ann told herself, but just then she noticed something wriggling about a foot and a half from the open wound on D's left wrist. It was his left hand.

She'd brought the limb this far because she thought it might help to revive the Hunter, but refusing to die, it had become active again at some point and now appeared to be working to reattach itself to D. But where did the mummified hand find such energy? The girl had a sudden flash of inspiration. It was Rosaria's doing. While the woman was filling D's ear with stupid notions, she must've given his left hand the energy to live. But how? Wasn't she just an ordinary human being sleeping back in their wagon?

Ann was truly confused, so she decided to focus her attention on D's left hand. Considering the amount of time that'd passed since they'd come here, how much ground the left hand had covered, and how slowly it appeared to be moving, it couldn't have received much energy.

"Up we go!" Ann cried, clinging to a stone column as she pulled herself to her feet. With another cry to spur herself on she took a step forward. She had no cane to lean on, and there was no place on the wall to use as a handhold. Reeling badly, she fell time and again, yet Ann finally caught up to the left hand. It had reduced the foot-and-a-half distance to just four inches.

"How unfortunate for you," Ann said, and though the poison had caused her face to swell again, she smiled like an angel as she surveyed the ground all around herself. Having caught hold of the back of D's left hand, she felt it struggling as she scooped up the ancient iron spike she'd spotted.

"Hey . . . quit it!" it called out in a hoarse and feeble voice, but that only served to ignite the dark nature that lurked within the little girl.

Piercing D's left hand with the iron spike, she pinned it to the ground . . . along with her own left hand.

"You can stay there till you turn to dust," Ann said.

After seeing the left hand's convulsions turn to limpness, she pulled her own hand off the spike.

"Sooner or later my dearest shall awaken. Until then, I'll care for him. He has no further need of you," the girl laughed, smiling like the sun even as the darkness in the ruins grew to that of watery ink.

At last the revived hand had fallen. Now nothing could bring D back but D himself. And the lives of Juke, Gordo, Sergei, and Rosaria depended on his actions this evening!

"Let us go, my love."

In no time, Ann reached the spot where she'd buried D. As her hands dug away the earth, there was more strength in them than before. For darkness was the ally of the Nobility.

After clawing away half the soil, Ann turned and looked at the door.

II

A shadowy gray figure stood there. In either hand he held a bouquet—apparently they were wildflowers. He was an old man in a gray hooded robe. A thin cord was wound about his waist, and from it hung a shabby leather pouch and a glass bottle.

Apparently he'd also spotted Ann, for he asked, "What's a girl like you doing here at this hour?" From the suspicious tone of his voice, he'd guessed something about Ann based on her attire.

"Oh, nothing," Ann replied precociously, shaking her head from side to side.

"You're not one of the village kids. Could it be . . . you're a Noble?"

"So what if I am? These are ruins. Anyone who wishes to may enter them."

An expression darker than the sky crossed the old man's face.

"That's right. I mean, you're wrong. Until I found it, this place really was just ruins. An abandoned place of worship. But not now—I'm trying to bring it back. My efforts have been half successful. Here I am now with the two of you. You're neither dead nor alive."

"How rude of you!" the girl exclaimed. "Just what I'd expect from a human. We are truly alive."

"Only by night," the old man said. "If you can't live in the light of the sun, then I'd hardly call that living. What's the Nobility doing out here? I doubt you've even noticed what I've been up to."

"I might well ask who you are."

"I'm a priest of the Adolka faith, and I was visiting a nearby village. On account of my age I retired three years ago, but before I did I found these ruins and started probing the mysteries of a lost religion."

"Religion? You mean that thing humans do to seek salvation?"

Religion still existed in this world. At the Nobility's peak, a disproportionate number of new religions had been created, and their number was said to have been in the tens of thousands. Although all of them sought protection and freedom from the accursed Nobility, all except a very few were merely for appearances, and these died out without the Nobles ever having to do anything about them. The Adolka faith the old man had just mentioned was one of the few remaining religions.

The old man didn't answer, and Ann lost interest in him. As she began digging dirt away from D's body once more, the aged priest called out to her in a tense tone, "What are you doing? Oh, is that a human buried there? How handsome he is! I see what you're up to. You buried your victim out here so you could indulge in your vile blood drinking without anyone finding out about it!"

What drivel! Ann thought to herself. *Not that it matters. He's a mere human, after all, and couldn't comprehend my lofty purpose or these feelings of love.*

"I can't very well let this go on. Stop—stop it, I say! You may have a sweet little face, but you're a terrible creature!"

The aged priest ran up behind Ann, raising the knife he'd drawn from the sheath on his hip. Apparently it'd originally been used in religious rituals, having a blade that twisted from the middle up and was inscribed with markings that looked like a sutra. In order to survive in a world ruled by the Nobility, religions had no prohibitions against killing.

But Ann made no move to stop the knife he'd raised. Still turned away from the aged priest, she took his blade right in her petite back. The blade should've pierced her heart from behind, but it stopped about an inch in.

A look of dismay raced across the priest's visage. The feeling he'd got from the knife wasn't that of stabbing into human or Noble flesh.

"Y-you're . . ."

A doll-like hand caught him by the throat as he tried to shout, and one little swing hurled the priest into the ruins. The moment he landed some ten feet away the bottle on his belt shattered, its contents spilling across the floor.

Forgetting all about the old man, Ann went back to digging out D. Further in, the sound of the old priest's groans and some rustling could be heard, but she paid no attention to them. The evening wind swept across the floor, sending tiny bits of dust flying and making her golden hair sway. Though she'd intended to work straight through until she was done, she was repeatedly forced to stop by the lingering effects of the poison.

And while that was happening, other activity was taking place in the far reaches of the ruins. The old priest who'd been dashed against the stone floor got up —clutching his back—and began to crawl in further on his hands and knees. In the back was a space with a stone slab that seemed to be the remains of some sort of ceremonial altar, and the walls and ceiling weren't cut stone blocks but rather solid rock. On closer examination, there were signs that someone had directed their energy toward utterly destroying it. In other words, the ruins a few yards from D and Ann's location were carved into the rock of the mountain.

Neither Ann nor the aged priest knew what had occurred here more than ten thousand years ago.

Long ago, it had been a little place where devout believers had gathered, and even after the nuclear war it'd remained, after a fashion. The Nobility feared and hated something that was here and had laid waste to the place, yet the people didn't abandon their faith and rebuilt it time and again, only to have it destroyed again. With the passage of time, it eventually fell into its present extremely desolate state.

The reason the priest had settled here was that there was a section about an ancient religion in old documents he'd read in his younger days. The icon that this religion worshiped was said to have the power to ward off any Noble. He became an itinerant priest with no fixed parish, crossing mountains and rivers, going from village to village seeking one of those icons. The priest believed that the thing he sought, this thing that frightened the Nobility, was here. Traces of it remained on the stone altar and the round stone base behind it. A sort of thick plank laced with cracks

was set in the center of the round stone, and the priest decided there must've been something about it that threatened the Nobility. That part of the old documents had been scorched and illegible. However, behind it there was only a rock wall. What had been found there?

The aged priest reached it. Below the wall was a lantern made from an empty can with a stub of a candle in it. From the look of the steel hammer and chisel lying next to it, it seemed that he'd been chipping away at the rock wall or carving something into it. Indeed, at about head level for the priest there was a cavity in the wall a foot and a half across and just a foot deep.

Striking one of the matches by the lantern, the aged priest pressed his hands together, mumbled something, and then touched the fingers of his right hand to his forehead and both shoulders. Folding his hands together once more, he began to chant indistinctly. What he mumbled was an ancient prayer he'd deciphered from those old documents, and the gesture was part of that religion's rituals.

"I've never tried this before against a Noble—but I'll show them the holy power the human race unlocked!"

Saying "Amen" over and over again, he waited for his prayer to take effect.

Nothing happened. The flame of his candle merely swayed in the breeze.

"This can't be!" he said. "My research couldn't be mistaken. This prayer was certain to make the Nobility—"

"Very well, off we go!" Lady Ann called out with joy, her cry echoing through the interior of the ruins, where even the air itself was damp with the deepening blue.

D's body had been dug out of the black earth. Bending over, the ten-year-old girl picked him up in her arms, her childish face glowing with elation. Not even sparing a glance to the priest who continued his useless prayers, she cradled D with the respect befitting a pietà of unearthly beauty and walked off toward the crumbling entrance.

She halted ten paces shy of the entranceway. The entrance to the ruins had a stone staircase. On it stood a figure—a bald man with a heavy beard.

The two met in the light of dusk.

"Father!"

"Ann, so here you are!"

Still dressed in his dusty traveler's garb, Roland, the Duke of Xenon, smiled at his beloved daughter. But there was something unsavory about his grin.

"What are you doing here?" Ann asked.

"The doctor's treatment of you was so horrible, I put some pressure on the general. Old Mehmet got it pretty bad, too, so he also pitched in. Then the two of us paid a little call on the doctor—"

Giving his daughter a brief rundown of the day's events, he then told her he'd gone out to search the whole area.

"You know how fast my suit is. First, I asked the villagers if there were any houses, caves, or ruins hereabouts, then I went around checking them all. This is the sixteenth place I looked—I never thought I'd find you this quickly. Well, let's head back. After I spear that Hunter through the heart, that is."

His last remark was filled with a determination that said he wouldn't give her another inch.

"If you go back, you'll do so alone. And if you want to destroy this man, you'll have to destroy *me* first."

Lady Ann's reply showed a similarly obstinate will, and it made the lips hidden beneath her father's beard quiver intensely.

"Do you still fail to see how I feel about you?"

"Ha! I can't begin to imagine how the man who created a daughter like me would feel," Lady Ann laughed. "Nor how a father who violates his own child feels."

"What are you talking about? That was only—"

"Because you saw in me the face of my mother, who died so *young*? Mother also looked like a ten-year-old when she died."

"Stop it!"

"Have you forgotten already? I remember it in vivid detail. What you did to me that time, Father, and what you called me. Alice, you said . . ."

All trace of emotion drained from the Duke of Xenon's face. His lack of expression was more terrifying than any look of rage, but it was at just that moment that a grayish light covered his features. Not stopping at his head, it swept across his arms, chest, stomach, and legs, turning him into an entirely different person. The gigantic exoskeleton he wore probably consisted of a single continuous sheet.

Lady Ann looked up in silence at where her father's head loomed at a height of ten feet.

"I could never hurt you," he told her. "However, come what may, that man must be disposed of here and now. I hate that bastard for deceiving my beloved daughter. Tearing him to pieces won't even begin to satisfy me."

"I could say the very same thing about you."

As the giant stood there paralyzed with shock, Lady Ann retreated further into the ruins.

"Ann!" the giant cried out, going after her.

If he wanted to, he could move without his footsteps making a sound, but he must've been extremely shaken emotionally, because the ground thundered under his massive form. The floor sank and the stone walls crumbled.

As the ruins were about to welcome new death and destruction, Lady Ann glided across the floor like a phantom.

The giant swung his right arm. A spear materialized in midair, jabbing into the floor right in front of Lady Ann.

Lady Ann narrowly dodged the weapon, but her shoulder struck it,

throwing her off balance and causing D to drop from her arms. The entire floor had receded, and D landed in the lowest part on his back. Oddly enough, it was in exactly the same location where Ann had buried him.

Although fine dust drifted through the air, Ann didn't so much as blink as she stared at her approaching father. No, the emotion that shot from her eyes wasn't one to ever be directed at one's own parent. It was quite obviously a hatred that burned like a flame.

Her bloodsucking flowers would no longer do her any good. Perhaps aware of this, she leapt to the bottom of the bowl-shaped depression in the floor and stood in front of D's chest with her arms extended to either side.

A long spear whistled through the wind, shattering the stone altar in the back of the ruins. A warning shot.

Black cracks raced across the floor and the rock wall.

"This is your last chance. Out of the way!" the Duke of Xenon shouted, a new spear glowing in his upraised right hand.

"Go ahead and throw it," Ann said. There wasn't an iota of fear in either her tone or the look on her face. The girl was prepared to die. She would defend the man she loved as best she could or perish along with him.

The sight of her there could almost be described as divine, and it left the titanic warrior tensed in the blue light. However, this lasted only a moment—his patience and forgiveness for his recalcitrant daughter had long since run out, and the face of his inanimate exoskeleton conveyed an unmistakable indignation as the giant swung his right arm home.

But who could've foreseen what came a second later? Who could've guessed that a horrible scream would erupt from his mouth?

Turning around, Lady Ann gasped and reeled backward as well.

They saw *it*. It burned itself into their retinas, searing their very brains.

This was what the aged priest curled up at the base of the far rock wall had sought—ancient holy men seeking to protect it from destruction by the Nobility had concealed it in a natural pocket inside the rock wall, and the blow from the long spear had collapsed that wall and brought it into view.

In the light of dusk lay an entire stone cross with a tiny human figure nailed to it through both hands. On the figure's head was a crown of thorns, and his expression of horrible pain and exhaustion was nonetheless filled with a boundless mercy and charity that was certain to touch all who beheld it.

What laid the fearsome, fiendish parent and child low was a stone crucifix that'd survived ten thousand years.

III

After so much time had passed, all memory of the ancient priests who'd tried to preserve it had been lost, and it had become a mere piece of stone. But then, what made something holy or unholy?

Before the little stone crucifix, the pair of Nobles lost their minds, the

Duke of Xenon reeling wildly as he began to return to the entrance.

"Fall back, Lady Ann—we are no match for its power!" the duke shouted.

He withstood the agony that was building like a blaze in his body. A second later, its heat became a terrible cold and he quaked from head to toe with chills. Worst of all was the unfathomable fear rising from the depths of his heart. Not even listening for his beloved daughter's reply, the duke fled the ruins in all haste, nearly tripping over himself in the process.

†

It was practically a miracle that Ann remained there. As hopeless as the situation was, she was concerned about D. If she were to try to take him out of there now, her father wouldn't sit idly by. It might be best if they died together, but if she couldn't have that, the least she could do was spare D from the present pain. For he, too, sprang from the accursed blood of the Nobility. In fact, D hadn't awakened yet. Still, the holy had a power that assailed the unholy regardless of whether they looked upon it or not.

On top of D, Ann hugged his head, and her body trembled as if with fever. She knew pain and peace at the same time.

This will do, she thought. *If I'm to die here with him, then this will do.*

Something skimmed by her head. Although Ann didn't see it, it was rather strange. A lone red insect had been hurled in through the entrance. It sailed straight to the back of the ruins as if flying under its own power, latching onto the center of the crucifix—and the neck of the person on it. It then stuffed the tail end of its abdomen into its round mouth and hung around the figure's neck like a rosary. And then, strange as it seemed, there was a crunching sound from its tail as it began to devour itself. What had been a ring a foot in diameter swiftly dwindled, and even when it had become about the same thickness as the modest statue's slender neck it kept eating, then suddenly it was gone. Literally nothing remained.

No, that wasn't entirely true. In the center of the figure's face, around the tip of his nose, there appeared a tiny black spot. A hole. A second later, it became a great black cavern about three feet across. Of course, it didn't occur on the surface of the figure. Nor was it on the cross. It was an opening that suddenly appeared in space—a tunnel. While it was unclear where it led, it whined as it sucked the air from this side of the hole, as if the other side opened into outer space. And air wasn't the only thing it inhaled—stone blocks and pieces of rock and anything else that would move were being sucked into that black space at a terrific speed. When a piece of stone larger than the hole came into contact with it, the hole grew wide enough to accommodate it, and then shrank back to normal again. At the rate it was going, one had to wonder if it wouldn't swallow the entire ruins.

Ann floated into the air. As did D.

At that moment, a second bug just like the first came flying from the

vicinity of the entrance and was swallowed by the void. The hole abruptly vanished, and the pair dropped back into their original location.

The rubble that hung in the air fell, one piece after another. As the sound of it rang out, from the same direction where the two insects had come a calm voice was heard to say, “The only way to fill the hole a ‘space eater’ leaves is to throw another of the bugs in.”

Ann recalled hearing the voice before. Sitting up, she said, “Grand Duke Mehmet!”

“Indeed, it is I—you’re fine, I take it? I’ve been searching for you along with your father, whom I happened to meet now by chance. Your father’s still here, but he’s in a horrid state. I wish to ask that you return with us. Of course, that would be after D’s head has been removed from his torso.”

“I refuse.”

“I’m sorry to say I’m not as malleable as your good father. I will only tell you once. Step aside.”

“*No*,” Ann replied, her face flickering in the lamplight as she shook her head determinedly. Miraculously, the candle lit by the aged priest hadn’t gone out when it’d rolled her way. Ann’s hair and skirt fluttered in the wind.

“Then here’s another bug. Let the two of you vanish together into the void,” the Nobleman said, his tone frightening for its persistent tranquility.

Space eaters—in return for swallowing their own bodies, these bugs tore a hole in space that would swallow anything and everything. And Grand Duke Mehmet was able to control these dangerous creatures as he wished.

Not saying another word, he let one of the bugs go buzzing through the air. This time it arced right up over D and Ann’s heads. Beginning to devour itself in midair, it opened a hole above Ann’s head . . .

A silvery flash shot straight up from below. It resolved into a blade, the tip of which thrust into the hole that’d appeared. The instant bluish lightning spilled from the hole, the sword pulled back out of it. And the terrible bug hole disappeared.

A black-gloved hand, stretching out from the pit, gripped the sword that had made this vertical thrust.

“D!”

Next to Ann, a powerfully built body rose. The wide-brimmed traveler’s hat was at a slight angle, but that couldn’t spoil the frightening exquisiteness of his features. Let the holy and unholy be silenced in the face of this young man’s beauty. Rising smoothly in the still-raging wind to stand like a temple guardian was none other than D.

“When and how did you awaken?”

Ann and Grand Duke Mehmet had spoken simultaneously, both of their voices laden with terror. They didn’t see how this could be.

From the time Ann had pinned it to the ground, his left hand had been eating the black soil. When the contents of the priest’s bottle had coursed down the sunken floor, the left hand had been right in the path of the

water. The wild wind, raging insistently, had suddenly died as if it'd been inhaled. And the flame from the candle that'd rolled down there had also been sucked into its mouth, quickly returning the shriveled hand to its normal proportions, after which it pulled itself off the iron spike and reattached itself to D's left wrist. Earth, water, fire, and air—the instant the four elements that composed the world were combined in that tiny mouth, pale blue flames had erupted and D had come back to life. Of course, this alone wasn't enough to overcome the malady unique to dhampirs. The time for him to awaken was probably approaching anyway, but there could be no doubting that his left hand had made the greatest contribution.

D stood. As proof that he remained blind, his eyes were shut. However, on seeing the valiant way he climbed up from the floor without even acknowledging Ann, who tried to cling to him, who would've thought he'd lost his vision? From the moment he awakened, his sole purpose for existence was to fight.

Evening dyed the world from blue to inky black—a fitting color for men doing battle.

"Grand Duke Mehmet, is it?" D called out.

In the darkness beyond the entrance there hung an enormous face. Through its eyes, the real grand duke, who was off drinking somewhere, looked at D.

"I'm surprised you know of me. This is the first time we've ever met."

"I heard about you. Quite a long time ago."

"I'm honored to hear that. I don't have time to explain the present situation, but since you called out my name, I take it you're prepared to meet your death."

"I heard about the situation," the Hunter replied.

Anyone who didn't know about D's left hand would've found this impossible to believe.

A look of surprise came to Mehmet's face. When his mouth opened, there was a whir as a pair of space eaters came flying out.

D forged straight ahead. Before the bugs could eat themselves, they were bisected in midair and left to fall to the floor as ordinary insect corpses. Before another bug could be launched, D leapt.

Desperately dodging a thrust of ungodly speed, the false Grand Duke Mehmet retreated. As he bounded from the stairs down onto the road, not a trace of his haughty smile remained on the face twelve feet from the ground. While he exhaled lightly, a pitch-black figure of grandeur sailed down from above. Soaring like a mystic bird, D struck with his blade—and the arms Grand Duke Mehmet had put up to block it were lopped off at the elbow. Though it was impossible, at that moment D got the impression he heard the real grand duke scream somewhere far away. But if that were all it took to make the Hunter hesitate, he never would've attacked in the first place.

A third heroic blow that refused to be parried struck the right side of the machine man's trunk. Fresh blood with the smell of oil spread through

the air like changing maple leaves in fall. D's blade had also ripped through Grand Duke Mehmet's enormous torso.

Moving away from the gigantic form as it thudded to the ground, D spun around.

On the other side of the road stood the Duke of Xenon in his combat exoskeleton. At the very moment the point of D's sword turned toward him, the Duke of Xenon bounded onto a massive bough some forty-five feet up in a great sixty-foot tree, circled around behind it, and vanished from sight.

"One down," the hoarse voice remarked.

"Not quite," Grand Duke Mehmet's voice replied.

Not even turning to look, the Hunter slashed to the rear with his blade, but it became sandwiched between a pair of enormous hands.

"What's this?" the hoarse voice groaned. After all, the fake Mehmet had just had both his arms cut off.

"Surprising, isn't it? This machine man is a part of me—and so long as I don't die, he can't die either," the grand duke laughed.

Not only were his arms back on, but his torso was together again as well.

"He can do everything I can, only with three hundred times the power. So, I think I'll snap that sword in two before leisurely doing away with you."

The grand duke put his strength into his arms. And the sword should have broken effortlessly—but it didn't. The palms of the machine man's hands were pressed together tight, but between them D's blade slowly worked its way down to the little fingers. Astonished, the grand duke tried with all his might but could do nothing to move the blade.

As the grand duke gave an involuntary and all-too-real cry of fright, the sword sank into his brow, halting after it'd sliced his head in two. Spraying oil out into the twilight like blood, the fake grand duke leapt back. Just before he landed, a large black hole opened on the ground, and he fell into it.

"I see now why all of us were called together. Four of your compatriots are set to be executed tomorrow. Come to the execution ground if you like."

After swallowing the machine man, the bug hole vanished.

Not even bothering to wipe off his sword, D returned it to the sheath on his back. But from the very beginning there hadn't been so much as a drop of blood or oil on it. The blade itself was simple steel—it had to be something about his skill.

The Hunter looked in the direction of the village.

"Tomorrow morning, eh?" the hoarse voice said. "How will you save 'em? Or will you abandon 'em? Which would be more your style? There's only one road here, but it runs in two directions."

D began walking away. There was no emotion to it at all, and that's what made it such a gorgeous gait.

"My love—D!" Ann called out in an earnest tone from the entrance to

the ruins.

D walked off without even looking in her direction.

Falling to her knees on the stone staircase, Ann sobbed, “Where are you going, D? That’s the way to—”

The last of her words were swallowed by the night wind.

The stars were out. Perhaps they had a prediction to make about the day to come. They burned as blood red as rubies.

end

POSTSCRIPT

As I've mentioned before, I've visited Transylvania twice. The first time was a private trip; the second to record material for a Japanese television network. There was a gap of several years between the two trips, and I think those years saw some very decisive change for the Romanian people. It was during this time that the dictator Ceausescu was overthrown. My second trip made me aware of the changes that'd occurred in Romania.

The first time I wanted to go to Transylvania, the taxi driver in Bucharest insisted he couldn't go outside the city, so my lovely guide had to negotiate with him and tell him I'd pay extra. Somehow we made it there, but the second time the public broadcasting company was true to form and we had a college student who could speak Japanese as our guide. Renting a van, we were able to travel about as we pleased.

At any rate, NHK was doing a travel series that went all over the world, and this episode was about the Transylvanian warlord who was the basis for Dracula, Vlad Tepes. As the author of more vampire novels in Japan than anyone, I was singled out for the assignment. To be perfectly honest, the second time I wasn't all that enthused about going because the first trip hadn't left me with a very good impression.

Even in the capital city of Bucharest there had been very little color. Needless to say, there was no neon, and the people's clothes were black or white. Occasionally there was a little red and blue mixed in.

After I got tired of Romanian cuisine, we did some checking and found a Chinese restaurant. I was delighted to go there, and I saw there were lots of items on the menu. It was in English, so I could basically understand it. I told a man who looked like the manager, "I want this, and this, and this." Saying nothing, he pointed to two items on the menu. Apparently he meant, "This is all we have." Well, it was better than nothing.

I told the people at the national travel bureau that I wanted to go to Transylvania, but the middle-aged woman at the counter coldly told me that taxis wouldn't go outside the city, as I mentioned earlier. Apparently a second, kinder middle-aged woman pitied me, and if she hadn't got a taxi for me, I probably wouldn't have made it out there. The interpreter I requested was beautiful and friendly, and the taxi driver was also a cheerful fellow. On straight stretches of highway, he'd get the car up to a hundred miles per hour and take his hands off the wheel to surprise us (my wife was with me). Over two days, our lovely guide showed us Bran Castle, Targoviste, and Transylvania's Castle Dracula (The same castle where Tepes's wife throws herself from the battlements in Coppola's film *Bram Stoker's Dracula*).

So, having seen the major sites, my general feeling was, "Oh, not again." Of course, by nature I dislike traveling, and that may have played a large part in it, too. However, I accepted the offer and flew from Narita to Paris, then from Paris to Bucharest.

The rest of the story will have to wait until the next volume . . .

Hideyuki Kikuchi
November 18, 2009
while watching *Bram Stoker's Dracula*

And now, a preview of the next book in the
Vampire Hunter D series

Vampire Hunter D

Volume 15

Dark Road Part Three

Written by
Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrations by
Yoshitaka Amano

English translation by
Kevin Leahy

Coming in August 2010
from Dark Horse Books and Digital Manga Publishing

EXECUTION DAY

CHAPTER 1

I

The device that'd been built in the village square for the execution was known as a guillotine. At the top of a fifteen-foot frame a heavy steel blade was set, and when the executioner released the attached rope, the blade dropped onto the neck of the condemned bent over beneath it. It was believed to be named after its inventor, and while it was said that he himself fell victim to the guillotine, the veracity of that claim was unknown.

"I've seen them a number of times, but when it comes to be your turn, it's really pretty creepy," Juke said from over by the window.

"It sure as hell is," Sergei agreed, sitting on the edge of the lowest mattress of the triple-decker bunk bed. Gordo was sleeping there. Being a woman, Rosaria was in the cell across from them. They were all in the village jail.

"If I'd known this was gonna happen, I'd have sold a little more of our stock on the side and used the money to really live it up."

"You seem to know all kinds of weird things. Isn't there anything you can do?" Juke said to Sergei, giving the bars across the window a good smack.

"Not a blessed thing. The clowns from the village really went through my stuff good and cleaned me out," Sergei said, showing Juke the palms of both hands. By that, he meant he didn't have anything.

"What'll happen to the goods in our wagon?" he asked.

"If these guys don't pilfer everything, they'll either deliver it somewhere or have someone come get it. Or they'll just say we were hit by bandits and make the whole thing disappear."

"Damn, this is a hell of a mess we've gotten into."

Sergei got up, walked over to the iron bars facing the corridor, and leaned against them.

"Is Rosaria gonna get the ol' *whooosh*, *ka-chuuung*, too?" he said, striking the back of his neck with the side of his hand.

Juke nodded. "On account of they think she's one of us. If they suspect anyone's ever had anything to do with the Nobility, then they get no mercy; it don't matter if they're injured, a woman, a kid, or what have you."

"Forget about the Nobility. In a case like this, humans are a lot more savage. At least all *they* do is drink your blood. I asked a guy who'd been bitten about it, and he said that partway through it, it felt pretty good. Man, I envy that Gordo. If they chop his head off the way he is now, he'll get an easy death without ever knowing anything about it," Sergei muttered, and he actually did sound envious right to the core of his being.

Just then, there was the sound of a door unlocking and the creak of hinges. A number of footsteps could be heard crossing the stone floor and

coming their way.

Preceding a couple of sturdy-looking villagers who were apparently the jailers was Mayor Camus. Her pale, aged countenance was in stark contrast to the black satin dress she wore. Needless to say, no one there knew that inside she was actually Dr. Gretchen, poison fiend extraordinaire.

"What a sty!" she said, waving one hand before her nose as she gave Juke and Sergei an icy stare. "Your execution will be conducted precisely at high noon. Just remember: at that exact moment, the guillotine will fall on the neck of one of you."

Though Juke asked her to spare Rosaria, he was met with a laugh.

Glancing out of the corner of her eye at the young lady who slumbered behind the opposite set of bars, she said, "She's one of you—and that's all there is to it."

"You cruel old bitch!" Sergei shouted. His anger was so great that he rattled the bars violently. "Who gains anything by that girl being beheaded? Let her live. If you don't, I'll come back as a ghost and wring the fuck out of that baggy old neck of yours!"

"Such language," Mayor Camus said, grimacing. She looked at him like he was a lowly savage. "We can arrange to have you alone executed earlier. Wouldn't you like to live even a little bit longer?"

"Shut your hole, you lousy murderer," he said, trying to reach through the bars and strangle her.

"Knock it off," Juke said, pulling Sergei back by the shoulders to stop him.

"What kinda scheme are you cooking?" he then asked the mayor.

"Dear me, what a thing to say! I wonder if you're suffering some sort of psychosis before your death."

"You know me, right?" Juke asked the mayor as he stared into her eyes.

"Of course I do."

"I know you, too. You're just like I remember. On the outside, at least."

"Oh, really?"

"You were a hard nut, but you weren't the kind of monster who'd put an innocent girl in the guillotine without doing any checking at all. Are you the real thing?"

"What utter nonsense!" the mayor spat.

Juke didn't catch the turbulence that flashed through her eyes.

Turning to the guards behind her, the mayor told them, "I wish to speak to these men alone. Remain outside until I call for you."

Not surprisingly, the pair of jailers were somewhat bewildered.

"Go!" she asserted coldly, and with that they left.

The door closed. Quickly going over to it, the mayor ran her right hand around its edges, and then touched it to the keyhole. Her right hand then went into her gown and pulled out a small earthenware vessel of a

muddy brown hue.

"You mean to tell me—" Juke groaned, guessing from that action alone that something wasn't right.

"Be silent," the old woman said as fingers like dead twigs took the lid off the vessel.

A pungent aroma filled the jail—a scent so dense it seemed to pollute each and every particle of air choked Juke and Sergei.

"G . . . g . . . guards!" they shouted, but their cries gave way to pained wheezing.

"My name is Mayor Camus. But my given name is Dr. Gretchen," the old woman informed them in the alluring voice of a young woman. "I wonder if you might've heard of the woman who poisoned fifty thousand Nobles? At present, all my energies are devoted to ridding the world of the Hunter who calls himself D."

Clinging to the bars, Juke and Sergei had already begun to slide down toward the floor.

Poison it wasn't, but the aroma was that powerful—the scent alone effortlessly pushed their consciousness down into the darkness.

"No matter what you do . . . to us . . . D . . . won't come," Juke said, his voice nearly a death rattle.

"Is that what you believe? I'm of a different opinion," the old woman jeered. The lid was back on the vessel. "I've recently become intimately familiar with his actions on the Frontier for the past few years. The details make my hair stand on end. He's possessed of a cruel and callous mind the like of which isn't to be found even among the Nobility. He's even mercilessly stabbed into the chest of a young Noble as the child wept and pleaded to be spared. Ordinarily, he would never come to rescue you."

Her wrinkled mouth twisted into a grin. Her lips were as glistening red as rubies.

"However, he is no Noble. His blood is filthy yet hot, like a human's. And so long as that drives his flesh, he won't be able to leave you to your fate. He's certain to come to your rescue. And this village will be his grave."

"Like hell . . . he . . . will," Sergei said, and then he lost consciousness.

"Stay away . . . D," Juke added. His hands came free of the bars, and he toppled in front of a broken chair.

"I took precautions to keep the smell from spilling outside," the mayor remarked. "You've only begun to serve my purposes."

The old woman's unsightly hand reached for the lock; it came free with surprising ease. Catching it so it wouldn't make a sound, she set it down on the floor and entered the trio's cell.

Looking down at the slumped forms of Juke and Sergei, she said, "What a vulgar pose!"

They were bent over not unlike men offering up prayers.

In her hand the old woman held three vessels.

"Each has a different effect. If by some chance you should be rescued,

D shall find himself forced to fight me on four fronts. And if you aren't rescued—well, I also have a plan for that contingency."

And then she took the vessels and poured their contents into the mouths of the three men. Three different aromas mixed in the air, creating a mysterious scent.

After she finished with the sleeping Gordo, the old woman put the lock back where it'd been and went to the opposite side of the corridor—where she entered Rosaria's cell.

As she took the lid off a fourth vessel, she felt something on the nape of her neck.

"Huh?"

She turned to look, but there was no one there. Although she'd gotten the feeling she was being watched, apparently she'd been mistaken.

"How unfortunate," said the mayor. "I can't even spare you, Sleeping Beauty."

A golden liquid was poured between the young woman's blood-less lips.

Presently, Mayor Camus grinned like a little girl and called for the guards, but after she'd left, a certain figure appeared without warning in the narrow passageway. It looked for all the world like Rosaria. But wasn't that Rosaria lying there in one of the prison beds?

Though the figure in the corridor gazed quietly but forlornly at her own sleeping self, her eyes suddenly became clear with intent and she started forward without a sound. Ahead of her lay a stone wall. Moving without hesitation, she was just about to hit that wall when the door in it opened and a guard came in. It was time for his appointed rounds. For an instant the two figures overlapped, then parted again. Rosaria had passed right through the man.

"Huh?" the jailer exclaimed, turning around, but by then Rosaria had already disappeared through the stone wall. Trembling, he slapped himself with both hands. He then went over to Rosaria's cell with long strides, peered in, and got a relieved look on his face.

"Must've drunk too much of those Tudor spirits," the jailer said, speaking aloud the most common explanation when a brush with the unbelievable threatened to fracture the mind. He then slumped back against the bars and let out a deep breath.

The smell that'd hung in the air had vanished without a trace.

"I don't know what it is, but I get the feeling this isn't gonna go off well," the man said. Like his life up until now, his tone was small and timid, but somehow he had absolute faith in these words.

II

The leaden clouds that covered the sky at dawn still lazed about as noon approached, showing no intention at all of moving on. Thinking of the ceremony to come and the odious tasks in its wake, some of the men and

women in the village had dour expressions, and they were busily scolding the children who ran around like mad. The guillotine that they'd worked through the night to erect towered proudly in the square, with a thick, sharp blade sitting at the top of two wooden uprights. In the simple hut beside it, the executioners sat sipping coffee and looking disdainful.

Ten minutes before the execution, Juke and Sergei were led out of the jail. Rosaria and Gordo had jailers on either side of them to hold them up. The road to the square had been packed on both sides with villagers. Their eyes gleamed with excitement—out on the amusement-starved Frontier, even a grisly death was a wonderful show. As the four condemned and their jailers moved, the people moved with them. Some acted up a bit, swinging axes and knives, but the guards carrying firearms soon put an end to that.

Mayor Camus stood before the guillotine. In her heart of hearts, she didn't really know if D would show up. There'd been no way to let him know for certain the day and time of the execution, and despite what she'd told Juke and Sergei the previous night, she wasn't entirely convinced he would come to their rescue. She'd intentionally postponed the execution one day so that D might learn about it. She couldn't say for sure that this would work . . . which meant that these four would be decapitated for no reason at all, but this terrifying woman wasn't concerned by that. If that came to pass, slaying D by her own hand would become problematic, but she possessed overwhelming self-confidence.

The Duke of Xenon and Grand Duke Mehmet were, of course, thickheaded men who'd attained their positions through brute strength alone. They lacked intellect; this was no longer an era when muscle was pitted against muscle. And the way Dr. Gretchen saw it, D was the same as those two, in which case her own wisdom would more than suffice for slaying him. All that remained was to cross paths with him. She'd think of another way to take care of him when she did.

The four prisoners reached the bottom of the scaffold. The hue of the clouds seemed to grow a good deal duller and heavier.

"There's no point in a whole lot of useless chatter. Let's get right to it," declared Mayor Camus. "First will be—"

"Me," Juke said, puffing his chest.

"We'll start with the girl."

"You bitch—what are you, a Noble?" Juke shouted as he tried to grab hold of the old woman, but the jailers promptly wrestled him down. "Kill me first! Do the woman later."

"This is hardly the place for a display of manly compassion," Mayor Camus said frostily, taking the chin of the limp Rosaria in hand and raising her face. "Fast asleep. It would be best for her if we got this over quickly, while she remains so. Set her up."

"Stop!"

Juke and Sergei continued to protest, but they were held hand and foot, and there was nothing they could do as Rosaria went up the wooden

stairs, supported by a man on either side. There were thirteen stairs.

On reaching the top, one of the jailers lifted the upper lunette, a wooden bar that had an opening in the center of its lower side. An eight-inch-thick log that'd been brought out expressly for this purpose was set in the hollow in the lower beam, and then the upper one was lowered again. After locking both halves in place, the jailer quickly made his way over to a wooden lever.

A stir went through the crowd like a wave, and it brought a silence that spread across the square.

Well aware of the spectators' gaze, the jailer waited a moment before pulling the lever. The sound of the falling blade mixed with that of friction from the rope. When the protruding section of the log was cleanly bisected and fell into the basket below, a cry of excitement went up from the crowd, which was clearly impressed.

Raising one hand to acknowledge the throng, the jailer went over to his partner—who'd been drilling him with an envious stare—and with his help bent Rosaria over before the lunettes. The entire process of setting her in place in the same manner as the log was carried out in an extremely professional manner.

Once more, silence returned to the square. Nothing had disrupted the event yet, and everyone hoped the same could be said for the rest of it.

Needless to say, lookouts had been posted around the village, their eyes agleam to keep from missing even the smallest thing. Not so much as an insect was to get through.

The jailer's hand grabbed hold of the lever. He gave it a rough pull. An atrocious whine dropped from heaven toward the earth.

This was the moment.

The guillotine floated up into the air, scaffold and all. Even the supports that were sunk in the ground pulled free with ease, and the soil they sent flying followed right along after them. A black hole had suddenly appeared in the sky fifteen feet above the guillotine. Before the villagers had even noticed it, the hole began sucking up everything in the area: the guillotine, its blade, Rosaria, and even the jailers on the platform. Still not knowing what was happening, Juke and Sergei also floated up into the air. Unwilling to relent, their jailers started after the men.

Mayor Camus alone saw what was really happening.

"A space eater?" she muttered.

Grand Duke Mehmet alone could control them. Was he interfering with the execution?

"Don't let them—" the mayor began to shout, but she gave up before she got to the word *escape*.

Not even the space eater in question knew where its hole would lead. The end of time or the bowels of the earth—wherever it went, anything sucked into it now would be lost forever.

When her thoughts had progressed to this point, she finally began to act like a leader, shouting, "Everybody, run away! You'll be sucked into the

hole!”

Before her words could serve as a guide for those running around aimlessly, they were instead drawn up along with the villagers being sucked toward the void.

In the woods about five hundred yards from the outer wall of the village, a figure in black sailed down from a particularly tall tree like a mystic bird. More than the way he landed without a sound, it was the way the hem of his coat spread like an ebony blossom just before he did so that made his identity clear at a glance. It was D. In the kingdom of intertwined shadow and light that was the woods, he could be described as a dazzling figure in black—and the figure beside him in equally gorgeous hues watched him with a suspicious yet enraptured gaze. Her expression seemed to inquire, *What do you intend to do?*

Asking nothing and being told nothing, Lady Ann had merely followed along diligently after D. Though D had said it would be better to have the girl around, he made no attempt to make use of her. And that actually hurt the darling little girl.

“Five seconds to go,” a hoarse voice from the vicinity of his left hand told him. D’s left hand was held up against his chest with the palm facing out. “Three . . . Two . . . One . . . Now!”

A small lump shot from the palm of his hand. A little bug. Flying a good fifteen feet through the air, it landed on a bush and devoured itself.

It was at that moment that a hole opened like a lazy black swirl. The tiny gap grew larger, and a second later the most incredible thing flew out of it. What should make the earth shudder and smash the grass flat but a brand-new guillotine that stuck into the dirt at an angle! Following that, people quickly piled on the ground one on top of another, forming a small mound.

“Exactly forty people,” the left hand reported, sounding quite pleased. “Oh, there they are. Rosaria, Juke, and Sergei. Why, even Gordo’s safe and sound. That was flawless timing. I hope you appreciate it.”

D ignored the hand. He squatted down beside Rosaria to take her pulse and check her pupils, and then he moved on to Juke.

After seeing to all four, D put the lot of them over his shoulders—they had to be between six and seven hundred pounds. Of course, this sort of thing must’ve been natural for a Noble, because Lady Ann didn’t look at all surprised.

Not even glancing at the remaining villagers, D put the village behind them. After all, these were people who’d been on the edge of their seats waiting to watch a girl get decapitated.

Outside the village a cargo wagon and horses were waiting—they’d been purchased early that morning at a neighboring village. Putting the four people in the vehicle, D got into the driver’s seat and took the reins. The team of four cyborg horses ran as if entranced by the bewitching

beauty of their master.

"How did you manage to do that?" Lady Ann asked from between the driver's seat and where the other four lay, her head cocked to one side. She was referring to how he'd gotten the four of them to appear from the hole the space eater had chewed through space.

Strangely enough, she got an answer quite quickly. From D's left hand.

"Everything sucked into a hole created by a space eater ends up flying off into the depths of time and space. It takes precisely ten seconds for that to happen. It's exactly the same as the way a person or animal needs time to chew before they swallow their food. And if another space eater opens a hole in a different spot at the instant the first reaches the time limit, everything that was sucked up automatically gets blown out through the new one. However, it takes superhuman skill to do that. I take it you saw the last three or four villagers who came out. They were pretty much reduced to protoplasm. Well, the good news is he was only interested in these four anyway."

As soon as the left hand's lengthy discourse ended, Lady Ann muttered pensively, "Controlling space eaters, of all things . . ."

The two bugs in question were ones Grand Duke Mehmet had launched at the newly risen D back in the ruins. D had bisected them instead of dodging them, and by funneling the power of his left hand into them, he'd managed to bring them back to life. This was possible in part because the bugs had an inherently tenacious life force. Nothing up to this point was particularly strange, but space eaters were not easily trained—it was impossible to predict when one would begin to devour itself. On account of this, the number of incidents where people trying to catch the bugs had been sucked instead into their holes were innumerable. In addition, no one but the most accomplished insect wranglers would ever attempt to keep and breed them. The techniques of working with space eaters were a closely guarded secret that was spoken of only in the world of darkness. Yet D had done it easily enough.

"How could you . . ." Lady Ann began, her eyes and cheeks colored with admiration.

"His old man's special, you see. There's pretty much nothing any Noble can do that he can't. Gaaaah!"

The voice died out there, sounding like it'd been strangled, and, after a short time had passed, D unballed his fist.

In the meantime, and even after that, Lady Ann's doll-like eyes swam with curiosity and anxiety as she pondered something. With a sort of sudden awakening, she then said, "You can do anything the Nobility can, and your father is special . . . Could it be you . . . Your highness is . . ."

As she murmured this, the wagon swerved off the road and started down into the valley on the right-hand side, its tires leaving ruts behind them. Keeping an eye on the steadiness of the cyborg horses that galloped down a steep and narrow path without any sign of danger, Lady Ann soon realized that it was the influence of D at the reins that allowed them to do

so, and the girl's eyes flickered with a deeper gleam of admiration.

Between trees that arched their branches like the legs of gigantic insects, the toppled ruins of a stone fortress seemed to lie humbly under the protection of the boughs. With this as their backdrop, they came before long to a place where there was the roar of a torrent and the dance of white spray. It was a waterfall.

The cyborg horses crashed right into the curtain of water, which was easily three hundred feet high and thirty feet wide, sending water splashing wildly before they reached the massive cavern that lay behind the falls.

III

With an area of at least ten thousand square feet and a ceiling some sixty feet high, the immense cavern was something Sergei had heard about before. He said it was the remains of an extremely ancient civilization he'd read about in old documents—a civilization that antedated the Nobility. It was said to be hidden behind a large waterfall and that from long ago those living nearby had been afraid to approach it, so he maintained that it should remain exactly as it'd been for the last ten thousand years. Of course, D had discovered this place because of his ultrakeen senses, but the presence of the cavern was extremely difficult to detect from outside—even at close range. While General Gaskell's assassins might be a different story, this would most definitely keep them safe from any pursuers from the village.

The interior was just a vast space without a hint of any ancient civilization.

On seeing the strangely smooth surface of the ground and walls, the left hand remarked, "This was melted. Must've been blasted with an ultraheat ray of more than a hundred thousand degrees for over a minute. That'd be the Nobility's doing. They tried to completely wipe out every trace of any civilization older than their own."

For a while D rode around inspecting the cave on a cyborg horse he'd unhitched from the wagon, and then he returned to the vehicle and laid the four humans out on level ground. When he put his left hand against their foreheads, Juke and Sergei woke up immediately.

D turned his gaze to Lady Ann.

"Yes?" she said eagerly. "Can I do anything for you?"

Though the look he gave her was cold as ice, to the girl it seemed for all the world like a loving glance from the man of her dreams.

"Get him up," D said, tossing his chin in Gordo's direction.

"Of course, I'll be happy to," she replied.

"She can set him right?" Sergei asked with a dull expression of astonishment.

"Why'd you let it go until now?" Juke asked, blinking.

"If I'd told her to fix him before, do you think she'd have done it?" D said to them. "If I'd tried to force her, she may have taken her own life."

"Precisely!" Lady Ann cried out. Her voice quivered with excitement.

“A Noble would rather plunge into the fires of hell than live with the disgrace of having benefited their foe. Had I been forced to save the very opponent I’d defeated, I would’ve chosen destruction right then and there. Ah, D, you understand me all too well!”

As the girl folded her pale and dainty hands in front of her chest with satisfaction, Juke and Sergei stared at her, dumbfounded, and then shifted their gaze to D.

“Be quick about it,” D told her with his usual gruffness, and then he put his left hand to Rosaria’s brow.

“It’s bad, as I suspected. This is a curse,” the hoarse voice said. “The only thing you can do is finish off the one who did this to her—Gaskell.”

Although Ann had listened to the left hand in silence, she inquired somewhat angrily, “Just who is this woman, anyway?”

“There’s no way you would know her,” D replied.

Ann shook her head from side to side, saying, “No, this woman came while you were asleep back in the ruins. She told you about today’s execution.”

“A doppelgänger?” his left hand muttered.

Such creatures weren’t particularly rare on the Frontier. However, most of them were projections that committed malicious acts against the wishes of the person they mimicked—in many cases they were that person’s negative side. If this applied to Rosaria, then would bringing her along on this trip be tantamount to setting out with a belly full of poison?

Perhaps Lady Ann had reached the same conclusion, because for the first time in an age, a hint of cruelty well suited to the girl flitted across her lips.

“This is a dangerous woman. I shall dispose of her,” the girl said.

Her right hand had already been raised to strike, and scythes like nails stretched from her fingertips. They whistled through the air toward the windpipe of the sleeping woman, only to halt in midair with a sound like a hard slap. The black-gloved hand that held her wrist belonged to D.

“Kindly unhand me,” the girl said, gnashing her teeth and writhing with frustration, an intense look on her face. It was the face of a woman out of her mind with love. It was nauseatingly ugly and beautiful beyond measure at the same time.

“How ridiculous!” she fumed.

As soon as the Hunter’s left hand touched the scruff of her neck, Lady Ann collapsed on the spot.

“I won’t allow this . . .” the fearsome little darling muttered as if goading herself on, her shoulders heaving with each breath. “Any woman who tries to come near you . . . I can’t allow to live . . .”

How did the beautiful Hunter feel listening to the girl’s groans of brutal honesty? Not even glancing at her, he told her, “Wake up Gordo.”

He then turned to Juke and Sergei and said, “What do you want to do?”

“What do you mean?”

The two looked at each other.

"You don't have any cargo to deliver to the other villages now. And if we part company, Gaskell won't be after you any longer."

"Good plan. Let's do that," Juke said with a grin, but then he got serious again. "Are you still under contract with us?"

"Of course."

"Then help us out here. We're gonna go get our wagon and merchandise back."

"Hey, hold on a minute!" Sergei cried out in a tone that could only be described as tragic. "We're going back to that village again? That's the craziest thing I've ever heard!"

"We're transporters. We get looted and nearly killed, so you think we can call it a day? Those other villages are waiting on pins and needles for that cargo to arrive."

"Yeah, but—"

"Say your daughter is dying. Medical supplies from the Capital could save her. But a bunch of useless transporters come along, heads hung low, crying about how all their goods got stolen and begging forgiveness. You think you're just gonna clap 'em on the back and tell 'em, 'Oh, that's okay'?"

The man had a piercing gaze trained on Sergei, who scratched his head uncomfortably.

"I get you. You're perfectly right."

"Damn straight he is!"

Turning full speed in the direction of that heavy voice, Sergei let out a joyous cry of, "Gordo!"

"Hey, you came to?" Juke said, following Sergei's lead and running over to his compatriot.

"Yeah. As you can see, I'm right as rain!"

Now sitting up, the bearded man smiled grandly as he flexed his muscles.

"Hey, Sergei!" he called out to his colleague.

"What is it?" Sergei replied, but no sooner had he brought his face closer than a sudden punch landed noisily against his jaw.

Though he dropped to his knees, he somehow managed to keep his torso upright, nursing his chin as he shouted, "What the hell was that for?"

"Regret what you said now, you big idiot? Any courier who's more worried about his own safety than the goods he's carrying is a waste of skin. And that's the kind of talk you were spilling a second ago. You ever try to turn tail again, and you'd better be ready for the consequences!"

"Okay! I get it! I get it already!" Sergei shouted with a pained smile. "Well, if the two of you aren't just brimming with a sense of duty! You'll never live to a ripe old age."

"Neither will you, dummy," the other two sneered back.

"How about giving some thought to how to retrieve it?" D said, his words bringing them all back to their senses.

And then, behind the roaring falls, a visage so handsome it seemed to be from another world and three relatively average faces alternately spoke in hushed seriousness or collided in heated debate, finally coming to a consensus when the light outside was fading in hue.

"I wonder if he's coming?"

"No, he won't come."

"Oh, yes, he will."

These three opinions mixed in the air, melting together as two travelers and an old woman stared intently at each other's faces.

Although they were disguised as middle-aged travelers, there could be no containing the intensity of their eyes or the inhuman stateliness that spilled from every inch of them. It was Grand Duke Mehmet and Roland, the Duke of Xenon. An hour earlier they'd left the village, which was in chaos following the incident with the space eater, and climbed to the top of a hill to the north. The silhouettes of birds skimmed across a sky deep blue with the approaching dusk. Their conversation focused on the fate of D and the transporters, and now the trio was of differing opinions.

"Why would they come back to the village where they nearly lost their lives just for their wagon and its cargo?" Grand Duke Mehmet said. Not only his lips but his whole face as well twisted from time to time due to the pain that shot through his arms and back—apparently the pain of the gigantic marionette losing its limbs had been transmitted to his own body.

"He'll come," the Duke of Xenon asserted. "I hear that for those who live on the Frontier, death is preferable to the shame of not fulfilling your professional obligations. The way I see it, they'll definitely return to get their wagon and their goods."

"You seem well informed as to the human way of life," said the old woman—Mayor Camus, who was in fact Dr. Gretchen—as she glanced briefly at the Duke of Xenon's face. It was a sarcastic look, and an equally sarcastic tone. "But this time it serves you well. I also believe the humans will come back. I have no idea why D is traveling with them, and he may be another matter entirely, but the three men will return."

"If they do, then good," Grand Duke Mehmet said, looking up. "The Duke of Xenon and I waited outside the village since early this morning. And we swore to ourselves that if D or anyone working on his behalf were to come, *this* time we would deliver them unto death. But who would've thought—I mean, who could've imagined he'd do it in such a manner?"

The grand duke removed the patch from his right eye.

In the direction of his gaze a number of birds circled and soared. Suddenly, one of them stopped beating its wings and went into a steep dive as if enamored of the ground. Less than a second later it was joined by a second—and a third. Once the poor birds had disappeared somewhere in the distant woods, Grand Duke Mehmet finally let out a breath and put the eye patch back on.

The power of a look alone—the murderous intent that radiated from his eyes—knocked birds in flight from the sky. This was a perfectly natural occurrence for a member of the Nobility, as was evinced by the fact that the expressions of his two fellow Nobles didn't change in the slightest.

But the ferocity of the grand duke's rage and the reason for his mood were painfully clear. They'd been bested using space eaters only the grand duke could control. Moreover, he could only imagine that the bugs in question were the same ones D had cut in two. If so, the responsibility for this tremendous setback all lay with him—Grand Duke Mehmet. That was the source of the rage that caused him to knock birds dead from the sky.

"Though I understand your anger, there is no need for the two of you to engage him once again," Mayor Camus/Dr. Gretchen said, gazing at the two men.

The indignant looks she drew from them were a response to the undercurrent of derision in her words.

"What do you mean by that?" Roland, the Duke of Xenon, inquired softly.

"What I mean is that I've already taken measures. Measures only *I* might take."

The men exchanged glances. Though each was an incomparable warrior, they needed no demonstration of this murderess's skill with poisons. The clouds of discomfort that welled up in their hearts began to take shape, telling them that this woman, of all people, might be able to do it alone.

"What kind of measures?" the duke was prompted to ask, which in itself revealed his state of mind.

"It's a secret," Dr. Gretchen replied, true to form, and then she looked up at the rolling blue sky and stretched. "If D should fail to return, then there is someone already under my spell—and that spell is eating its way into them. Ah, the sunlight we cursed for so long feels so good today! There's something to be said for the daytime, isn't there?"

One might even say there was an innocent joy in her eyes, but then those same eyes abruptly narrowed as she said, "Oh, there goes a flock of birds. Winged psychopomps, I believe. They're flying twice as high as the ones the grand duke struck down with his glance just now. Can you do the same to them, Grand Duke Mehmet?"

The man with the look that killed turned away in a snit. Not surprisingly, it was beyond his ability.

"And you, Duke of Xenon?"

As she asked him this, the traveler in red hauled back with his right arm as if to hurl a javelin. At some point, grotesque armor had come to sheathe him from the elbow down to the tips of his fingers. He swung his empty right hand. But the sound that ripped through the air wasn't that of a hand.

It rose higher. And higher. And higher still.

"You scored a hit," Dr. Gretchen said with squinted eyes.

About twenty seconds later, it became abundantly clear that a number of the avian shapes were falling. They dropped. Ignoring the rotation of the earth, they landed right in the center of a circle formed by the trio. Roughly a dozen winged psychopomps had been pierced through the breast and out the back by an unseen spear high above the earth.

"Remarkable," Dr. Gretchen said with a smile. And remaining in Mayor Camus's form, she said, "But that was only fifteen of them. From six miles away, the Duke of Xenon's spear could do no better than fifteen birds out of a hundred."

She punctuated this with a haughty laugh.

"You seriously intend to say you could do better, Dr. Gretchen?" the Duke of Xenon asked, flames of outrage covering him from head to foot like a suit.

"But of course, my good duke—allow me to demonstrate."

The old woman raised her left hand. A golden ring set with a purple stone glittered on her ring finger. When she flicked the stone up, a mistlike strand rose from the setting and climbed into the air.

Ten seconds passed. Twenty.

Grand Duke Mehmet and Roland, the Duke of Xenon, exchanged despicable grins that hardly suited the vaunted Nobility. They knew what Dr. Gretchen was trying to do. However, there was no way any poison on earth could reach thirty thousand feet into the atmosphere without dispersing. Especially not when what had risen from her ring had been a gas.

The smiles of the pair vanished. For Dr. Gretchen had looked up at the heavens. And laughed.

As she laughed, she made an easy leap, and then a second—and had bounded thirty feet away.

"Stand back!" she told them.

Grand Duke Mehmet made a leap that carried him thirty feet as well.

And a second later, all over and around the Duke of Xenon—who'd been left behind—there was the successive thudding of impacts like the crashing of angry waves, and the Nobleman was shrouded in a crimson fog. The Duke of Xenon had been enveloped by his exoskeleton, but suddenly his shoulders and head were struck and countless chunks went flying everywhere. Beaks. Heads. Eyes. Talons. Wings. Feathers. They were birds. Having plummeted thirty thousand feet, the birds noisily thudded against the duke and the ground. The fog was blood.

"That's all of them aside from your fifteen," Dr. Gretchen said off in the distance. "I've also arranged to use this virulent poison against D—it'd been dispersed by the wind, dissolved into the air, and diluted to but a millionth of its normal strength when it reached those unfortunate birds."

The doctor spun around.

"Run if you like. Hide under a rock somewhere. First I shall cover the ground for three miles with the corpses of anything that flies."

And just as the old woman had said, for the next few seconds birds,

insects, and reptiles—anything that flew—dropped by the tens of thousands to blanket the ground around them with their corpses.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in Chiba, Japan, in 1949. He attended the prestigious Aoyama University and wrote his first novel, *Demon City Shinjuku*, in 1982. Over the past two decades, Kikuchi has written numerous horror novels, and is one of Japan's leading horror masters, working in the tradition of occidental horror writers like Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, H. P. Lovecraft, and Stephen King. As of 2004, there were seventeen novels in his hugely popular ongoing Vampire Hunter D series. Many live-action and anime movies of the 1980s and 1990s have been based on Kikuchi's novels.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Yoshitaka Amano was born in Shizuoka, Japan. He is well known as a manga and anime artist, and is the famed designer for the *Final Fantasy* game series. Amano took part in designing characters for many of Tatsunoko Productions' greatest cartoons, including *Gatchaman* (released in the U.S. as *G-Force* and *Battle of the Planets*). Amano became a freelancer at the age of thirty and has collaborated with numerous writers, creating nearly twenty illustrated books that have sold millions of copies. Since the late 1990s, Amano has worked with several American comics publishers, including DC Comics on the illustrated Sandman novel *Sandman: The Dream Hunters* with Neil Gaiman, and Marvel Comics on *Elektra and Wolverine: The Redeemer* with best-selling author Greg Rucka.